

**TRAUMA, ETHICS AND MYTH-ORIENTED LITERARY TRADITION
IN JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER'S *EXTREMELY LOUD &
INCREDIBLY CLOSE*¹**

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ABSTRACT. *This essay proposes a reading of Jonathan Safran Foer's second novel as a literary artifact that the author has consciously elaborated following the strategies of a myth-oriented tradition that had its first literary outbreak in times of High Modernism, being subsequently pursued by magical-realist and postmodern writers. The novelist associates strategies and motifs belonging to such tradition to a context that fulfills the premises of contemporary trauma fiction but that also aims at establishing comparisons between the 9/11 terrorist attacks and WW2 events that North American readers are here forced to remember from the perspective and opinions of a nine-year-old traumatized narrator. Modernist and magical-realist elements combine in a novel that openly demands the ethical positioning of its readers.*

In an interview published in *The Cleveland Jewish News*, Leana Zborovskiy (2005: 55) asked young author Jonathan Safran Foer about the peculiar nature of the protagonist in his second novel:

I asked Foer how he got into the head of a nine-year-old boy who is scared of Arabs and people who wear turbans, and who asks his mom to not fall in love again after his dad dies in the World Trade Center disaster. "When I was writing,

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Oskar's character felt honest", he replies. "Just like when you were reading it, it felt honest".

Possibly, many readers of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005) will not remember Oskar – the young protagonist and narrator of a substantial part of the novel – as a particularly racist, Arab-hating nine-year-old boy. More so, readers who check out the second page of the novel – when it has not been disclosed yet that the narrator is only a nine-year-old boy – will remember that Oskar defines himself as a pacifist who gives up his jujitsu lessons because he does not want to kick his master's "privates". However, on the same page he also states the following: "Self-defense was something that I was extremely curious about, for obvious reasons" (Foer 2005: 2). Being a novel written in the United States, readers might soon assume that the protagonist is one more among the increasing number of U.S. Americans aware that they live in one of the most dangerous places of the world (see Clymer 2003: 9-10). However, Foer always discloses the truth gradually and finally we discover that his "obvious reasons" for being attracted to self-defense are directly related to the most painful event the people of the United States have suffered since the entrance in the new millennium: the September 11 terrorist attacks. His father was one of the victims in the Trade World Center, an experience that resulted in terrible traumatic effects for the boy. As happened in Foer's first novel *Everything is Illuminated* (2002), the gradual disclosure of the truth and the release of the protagonist's feelings become two of the main literary strategies in his second book to affect the ethical perspective of his readers, a perspective that comes out of that "honesty" the author seems to be so concerned about. As I contend in the following pages, despite the negative critiques given by some reviewers, Foer's book should not be considered as a realist novel dealing with the traumatic effects of the 9/11 attacks. *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* is a conscious artifact built on techniques and strategies inherited from a specific literary tradition that departs from realist views of reality. Such strategies function to bring forth a stand of ethical affirmation when readers face the protagonists' traumas but they also introduce an unnerving political critique about the implications of terrorism.

Although not reaching up to the same celebrity level as his first book did, Foer's second novel also became a commercial success even if so far it has not made its way into the film industry, as has already happened to *Everything is Illuminated*. This time, however, some of the reviews his second novel received were not very positive. The writer was accused by some critics of being extremely sentimental (David Gates 2005 from *Newsweek*) while in some of the most well-known American newspapers the book was disliked because of the author's

immaturity and “gimmicky” effects (Walter Kirn 2005 from *NYTBR*). Foer was insistently accused of an excessive use of visual material (photographs) and other experimental strategies. From the pages of *The New York Times*, Michiko Kakutani (2005: E1) affirmed that the novel’s main narrator and protagonist Oskar was too young for the things he says and does and overtly defined him as

[...] an entirely synthetic creation, assembled out of bits and pieces of famous literary heroes past. Like J. D. Salinger’s Holden Caulfield, Oskar wanders around New York City, lonely, alienated and on the verge, possibly, of an emotional breakdown. Like Gunter Grass’s Oskar Matzerath in ‘The Tin Drum,’ he plays a musical instrument (in his case, a tambourine) while commenting on the fearful state of the world around him. And like Saul Bellow’s Herzog, he writes letters to people he doesn’t know.

However, unlike other reviewers Kakutani was also perceptive enough to point at one of the writer’s literary sources: Gabriel García Márquez’s magical realism, even if, she stated, Foer did not really understand “this sleight of hand”.

Both as narrator and as protagonist, Oskar is certainly precocious. He is, when still an eight-year-old boy, a hungry reader of books like Stephen Hawking’s *A Brief History of Time*, which is, he confesses, his favorite one even if he has not been able to finish it yet (Foer 2005: 11). Oskar also defines himself as a professed atheist. In addition to that, his mother does not seem to be very believable either. What kind of mother would allow her eight-year-old only son to cross New York alone to visit grown-up strangers only to ask them some questions about a mysterious key? Possibly not many parents would allow their young boy to travel from Manhattan to Staten Island in the sole company of a deaf old man who happens to be one hundred and four years old, so no wonder that as literary characters Oskar and his mother were not realistically believable for many reviewers. Such unbelievable quality of the main characters, the mixture of written narrative with visual material, and the telling of a traumatic story related to the 9/11 attacks were the three aspects most currently criticized by Foer’s reviewers (see Kelly and Trachtenberg 2006; Oppenheimer 2005; Eder 2005; and Markovits 2005).

However, despite the apparent flaws existing in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, there are other aspects that help us explain the novel’s departure from conventional realism and clarify Foer’s position as a young writer of ethical aims. My first specific contention in this paper is that his second novel is clearly the product of a novelist who is very much aware that he is at the end of a literary tradition – in the sense provided by Eliot in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919) – rooted in modernist thinking. He uses his knowledge of such tradition – that by now has also incorporated elements from magical realism and postmodernism

(see Hutcheon 1988) – to take his readers to ethical grounds beyond the postmodern ethos, without departing from its narrative strategies and motifs.² Foer, a graduate from Princeton who studied philosophy and literature, had among his teachers there novelist Jeffrey Eugenides – Pulitzer Prize winner in 2002 with *Middlesex* – who shares with Foer his condition of being a young white American writer also attracted to the ethical possibilities of literature and to the strategies of magical realism.³ From Eugenides, Foer had the opportunity to learn about literary history, narrative devices, and motifs that help to increase his readers' (emotional) interest. More specifically, Foer may have been attracted to the mythic-oriented tradition that in times of High Modernism – following the line dictated by Eliot – agglutinated elements coming from the English Golden Age and the Romantic ethos with the modernist-oriented views provided by some early anthropologists and psychoanalysts such as James Frazer and Carl G. Jung. This myth-oriented literary approach is not very difficult to trace in the pages of writers as diverse as Eliot himself (*The Waste Land*), Faulkner (*The Sound and the Fury*), or Steinbeck (*The Grapes of Wrath*). This literary perspective was recuperated, often for parodic effect, by contemporary writers such as Saul Bellow (*Henderson the Raining*), Thomas Pynchon (in all his novels to date), or John Barth (*Giles The Goatboy*). Such modernist/postmodernist “mythic tradition”, in its departure from classic realism and its use of a number of themes and motifs referred to memory, the mythic cycle, decadence, haunted spaces, twin or reflecting characters, or archetypal protagonists, among others, shows very clear links with Latin American and other forms of magical realism.⁴ Foer's mentor Geoffrey Eugenides made extensive use of frequent

2. In “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, there is a strong emphasis on the idea that no one is alone. According to Eliot (1966: 15), the artist is living along a line that comes from the past: “No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone”. On the contrary, the writer is linked to the dead poets and artists. Eliot (16) comes very close to affirm the existence of a Jungian collective (un)conscious of art and poetry that reaffirms the importance of tradition: “The poet must be very conscious of the main current [of art], which does not at all flow invariably through the most distinguished reputations. He must be quite aware of the obvious fact that art never improves, but that the material of art is never quite the same”. Such material of art in the case of Eliot and other influential modernist writers came, to a large degree, from classic literatures, the Renaissance and Golden Age, and the Romantic ethos, periods that were also favoured later by magical realists and postmodern writers.

3. To the question posed by Foer himself in an interview to his former teacher, Eugenides acknowledged having read García Márquez's masterpiece *Cien años de soledad* in his “late teens and early twenties”. In the same interview, Eugenides was already very conscious of his role in the new US novel. Postmodernism had hit a dead end, he admitted to Foer (2002a: 77), and although the formal strategies of his second novel *Middlesex*, were certainly *postmodern* what was new in it, he affirmed, was “the content”.

4. See Bowers (2004: 32-65). Manzanos and Benito (2002: 1-21) also offer an illuminating analysis of the role of cultural borders in North America that they later extend to a consideration of magical realism as a transnational product characteristic of postcolonial societies (2003: 125-159). As Brian

elements in this tradition in his novels *The Virgin Suicides* and *Middlesex* (Collado-Rodríguez 2005 and 2006) and Foer himself openly resorted to the same mode in his first novel, *Everything is Illuminated* (see Behlman 2004). Although in a more conceited manner, in his second novel such mythic mode helps us understand why fantasy as a whole – not only the one reflected through Oskar's focalization of the narrative – is also an important ingredient in a book that reviewers frequently understood as a realist example of post-September 11 trauma fiction. The next pages will deal with the ways in which non-realistic or fantasy elements affect the perception of trauma and the ethical implications in the novel.

From the perspective of a young American novelist who decides to write about the September 11 attacks, there is firstly a very important sociological fact to be considered. It has been insistently debated that even for some years after the attacks, many people did not want to face the facts, as if by avoiding talking, writing or filming about the massacres they would exorcize them.⁵ Even Hollywood had to refrain from showing movies concerning terrorist attacks for some time after September 11, 2001. For specialists in post-traumatic syndrome, this situation is not outside the norm: the traumatic event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time. It emerges as a non-experience that brings about the necessity of using memory and repetition (Caruth 1995: 4-5). In a way, we may guess that both the U. S. American public and the media unconsciously felt that by avoiding facing the truth of what had happened they could go back to a moment where they still had the opportunity to avoid the terrorist attacks. The issue takes us to the possibility of traveling back in time. From realist premises to do such a thing is considered pure fantasy. In contemporary Western societies, people are not supposed to believe consciously in the fantastic unless they are fools, primitive beings, highly religious persons, or children. As I anticipated above, when dealing with his second novel Foer, following the example set by his former teacher Jeffrey Eugenides, located

McHale contended in his often-cited book *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987), the unresolved condition of modernist epistemology brought about the uncertain ontological condition of the postmodern, a feature clearly shared by magical-realist works.

5. The issue itself responds to the condition of a collective trauma and its subsequent post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), see Caruth (1995: 4-5). For an interesting contrast between the fortunes run by some films on the 9/11 and other media expressions, see Kate Kelly and Jeffrey A. Trachtenberg's opinions in "9/11 Hits the Multiplex" (2006). Edward Wyatt (2005: E.1) states the following in "After a Long Wait, Literary Novelists Address 9/11": "Using fiction and imaginary characters can sometimes make an overwhelming event feel human. But with so many people personally connected to those who were killed on Sept. 11, taking a reader inside a World Trade Center tower... can evoke hostile reactions". Foer experienced such reactions when delivering some of his public talks on *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*. Some reviewers, especially Walter Kirn, became particularly vicious on the issue. Compare the more ironic views of Clymer (2003: 11-12).

himself at the end of a literary line that, rejecting a classic realist approach, finds in fantasy, myth, and magical realism powerful strategies to make readers think about our present condition. Therefore, his choice of a boy for the role of main narrator in the book already introduces an effect of uncertainty: does fantasy exist or is it only in the boy's mind?

After the success of his first novel, which is a narrative about the Jewish Holocaust also from postmodern and magical-realist premises, Foer stays again at the end of the same literary line with a second novel where fantasy is mostly – but not only – presented from the perspective of nine-year-old narrator Oskar. It is from his precocious focalization that readers can fully realize the suggestion that time might go backwards, as visually shown in the last 15 pages of the book. At the end of the novel, readers are forced to progress back to the past because they can actually visualize Oskar's make-belief wish for a happy ending. Activated as a powerful metaphor for the United States, young Oskar's condition is obviously post-traumatic and therefore susceptible of departing from normal behavior. However, as also reported by himself several times, his condition – and the U. S. American people's in general – is not experienced as it should have been a few decades ago because now he is also exposed to TV and the Internet. As a viewer, he has the opportunity to see the reel of the attacks once and again. The planes go repeatedly crushing against the Twin Towers as Oskar can replay the same event constantly. How could not his sense of time be disrupted?⁶ From his classes on fiction, Foer has possibly learnt about the metaphorical importance of the cycles of infinite repetitions that saturate the pages of writers like T. S. Eliot, William Faulkner, Jorge Luis Borges, or Gabriel García Márquez. Such writers were creators of stories written in a mythic mood that defined a new master narrative for modernist and late modernist literatures (see Manganaro 1994; compare Eliade 1951), a narrative whose imprints persist in Foer's novels to date.

In *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, the writer puts together his knowledge of mythic thinking, as reflected in modernist and postmodernist literature, with the ways the new technologies – especially TV, the Internet, and video games – are affecting our contemporary perception of reality and the passing of time. The result of it is the suggestion of re-experiencing the past as if life were a video or a DVD and you could rewind it when necessary. In other words, from the

6. On the impact of the new technologies in our understanding of life as a film, see Simmons (1997: 41): "We have actually become our images: when we see ourselves as though seen on TV, the old distinctions between inside and outside, self and society no longer hold, and the self merges with its images environment". Compare McLuhan's (1964) influential predictions on the role of the media and the new technologies for our understanding of reality.

primitive belief in the cyclical nature of life that so much attracted modernist thinkers like James Frazer, Carl Jung, Mircea Eliade or Joseph Campbell, Foer takes his readers to the psychic impact of the contemporary technological (McLuhan's "extensions of man", 1964: 45-52). In his second novel, Eliade's myth of the eternal return becomes the myth of the visual rewinding of images, via the precocious narrator's imagination. Accordingly, the last 15 pages of the book show 15 photographic frames (taken from the Internet) that visually describe a man on his way *up* one of the Twin Towers. He is not falling down to his death, as *really* happened, but floating back up to the window, as Oskar would like it to be. The child has achieved such fantasy motivated by our human – previously mythical now also technological – predisposition to believe in the possibility of rewinding time or coming back to the beginning. Of course, it could be argued that this is no more than wishful thinking mediated by the Baudrillardian simulacrum, a child's fantasy to enhance our sentimentality at the end of the novel. But, in its uncertain approach to reality, the book is also skillfully and systematically organized to make us depart from a mere realistic approach to life. Actually, Oskar is not alone in his attempt to rewind past experiences. The novel also comprises chapters (testimonies⁷) written by two of Oskar's grandparents – his deceased father's parents. Progressively, the three narrators answer and complement each other, helping the readers in the gradual disclosure of their particular truths, a necessary process for the release of the characters' traumatic forces and the readers' ethical positioning.

The case of Oskar's grandmother also offers explicit links both to mythic modernist narratives and to Foer's first novel, where readers can find the figure of the hero's matriarch as a seer.⁸ She partakes in the condition of paradoxical Eliotian characters who like the Sybil of Cumae, Tiresias or Madame Sosostris in *The Waste Land*, have physical impediments to see the reality around them correctly, despite which they are prophetic seers. Oskar's grandmother insistently affirms that she has "crummy eyes" and even writes her life story with a typewriter unaware that it has no ribbon (Foer 2005: 124). However, she also has recurrent dreams that anticipate the World Trade Center terrorist attacks (230-232). Furthermore, after many years living in the United States, she also participates of

7. On the importance of [testimony and] *testimonio* in trauma literature, as a "literary simulacrum of oral narrative", see Vickroy 2002: 5-6.

8. The figure of the old woman with visionary powers is reiterative in mythic-oriented modernist narratives such as *The Waste Land* (the Sybil, Madam Sosostris, Tiresias as a hermaphrodite seer), *The Sound and the Fury* (Dilsey), *The Grapes of Wrath* (Ma Joad), *Cien años de soledad* (Úrsula Iguarán), *Los Funerales de la Mamá Grande*, or even in contemporary novels such as Jeffrey Eugenides's 2002 Pulitzer Prize winner *Middlesex*.

the younger narrator's technologically simulated perception of time, as readers find out by the end of the novel:

A knocking woke me up in the middle of the night.

I had been dreaming about where I came from.

[...]

In my dream, all of the collapsed ceilings re-formed above us. The fire went back into the bombs, which rose up and into the bellies of planes whose propellers turned backwards, like the second hands of the clocks across Dresden, only faster. (306)

With such dream, she establishes a clear connection with her grandson and his wish to go back in time by using the 15 photographic frames that visually describe the falling man on his way up the Tower. Oskar's final words in the novel refer again to such wish for time to be retraced. However, the visual fantasy accomplished by the reordering of the photographs, giving the viewer the impression that time flies back, is reinforced by the realization that according to contemporary scientific theories Time is a category that does not need to follow human logic. As mentioned above, Oskar states that Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* is his favorite book. He even sends some letters to the influential physicist, who eventually invites him to Cambridge in a letter where the cosmologist also mentions some words by Einstein that stand as a powerful *mise-en-abyme* icon of Foer's whole novel: "Our situation is the following. We are standing in front of a closed box which we cannot open" (305). The mysterious box, whose contents cannot be released or even viewed, impedes the effective communication implicit in the title of the novel. Our physical senses, as Oskar's grandparents' relationship exemplify, do not necessarily take us to a sound understanding of reality. On the contrary, the new physics (postulated as relativity theory and quantum mechanics) take us to an understanding of life that stands very far away from what our senses show us (Nadeau 1981). Some scientific theories even allow for the possibility of what seems to be only a child's fantasy. After having dealt with relativity theory and stressed the fact that according to Einstein's celebrated notions time has become a more personal concept, relative to the observer who measures it, in *A Brief History of Time* Hawking (1990: 143-144) introduces a concept that perfectly fits into Oskar's fantastic wish:

When one tried to unify gravity with quantum mechanics, one had to introduce the idea of "imaginary" time. Imaginary time is indistinguishable from directions in space. If one can go north, one can turn around and head south; equally, if one can go forward in imaginary time, *one ought to be able to turn round and*

go backward. This means that there can be no important difference between the forward and backward directions of imaginary time. On the other hand, when one looks at “real” time, there’s a very big difference between the forward and backward directions, as we all know. Where does this difference between the past and the future come from? Why do we remember the past but not the future? (emphasis added)

Hawking also uses explicitly the image of the rewinding machine to explain the notion of imaginary time (144). However, he warns his readers that the second law of thermodynamics or entropy makes the existence of such concept impossible in our “reality”. The law of entropy explains the existence of three arrows of time, two of which point from the past into the future: the thermodynamic arrow or the direction of time in which disorder increases, and the psychological arrow, by which we feel time passes. The third arrow of time, the cosmological, does not necessarily have to point in the same direction (from the past into the future) but, the physicist concludes, it is only when the three arrows point in the same direction that conditions are suitable for the development of intelligent beings (145). In other words, Hawking’s book allows for Oskar’s initial optimism about the possibility of traveling backwards in time but eventually forces him to resign from such possibility at the last pages of his narration. The theoretical possibility for imaginary time does exist – that is to say, it is not a “fantasy” – but the necessity for the direction of the three arrows of time to point in the same direction does not make such an option finally viable in our reality.

Together with his interest in myth, science, and visual experimental strategies, Foer also uses other devices to increase his readers’ emotional response when facing Oskar’s story, devices that clearly relate to trauma fiction.

Trauma fiction is in itself an expression of recent coinage. It is in the early 1990s that trauma theory and its subsequent application to literary works emerged in the United States, then mainly concerned with the Jewish Holocaust and its ethical implications (Whitehead 2004: 4-5). In later years, for obvious emotional reasons the media and cultural imaginaries of the United States moved to the aftermaths of the September 11 terrorist attacks.

In an sustained attempt to elaborate on the prospect of fixing the literary limits of “trauma fiction”, in her homonymous book Anne Whitehead relies on the work of three eminent trauma theorists who started their academic life in the Yale School of Criticism, namely Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Geoffrey Hartman. Whitehead’s final aim is both to list the conditions that make of trauma a structure of the past experience and to point at the literary strategies that make it possible to communicate the apparently *ineffable* narrative of such traumatic experience. In

order to trace the imprints and the workings of trauma, Whitehead arrives at three different premises that she applies to a corpus of contemporary fiction.

From the theories developed by Caruth, Whitehead (2004: 6) argues the necessity of analyzing a first important strategy in trauma fiction: Caruth's work, she wrote, "suggests that if trauma is at all susceptible to narrative formulation, then it requires a literary form which departs from conventional linear sequence. The irruption of one time into another is figured by Caruth as a form of possession or haunting". In other words, by quoting the Yale critic, Whitehead hints at the importance of both the fantastic mood (see Jackson 1981: 13-91) and what critics usually call "experimental fiction", that is to say, a series of narrative strategies that operate to disrupt logical or chronological temporality in an abrupt or, at least, obvious manner (compare Vickroy 2002: 1-35). It should be noticed here that such disruption of the logical and the chronological operates on the category of time because trauma is the result of a past experience that comes to or persists in the present – via post-traumatic effects – to haunt or obsess a subject who, as a result, suffers from a condition of emotional repression. Therefore, there is a psychic collision of past and present. Temporal limits become anything but clear for the subject, an issue that has already been commented above for the cases of Oskar and his grandmother. Accordingly, the "appropriate" trauma story should be reported by means of experimenting on narrative temporality. Furthermore, according to Caruth (1995: 6), trauma emerges as a "crisis of truth" but such crisis may extend beyond the individual to affect the whole community if it is reported or accessed at a cultural level. Such notion allows Whitehead (2004: 8) to progress onto Geoffrey Hartmann's work and to agree to his important observation that "ethical questions raised by testimony are inherently literary". That is to say, the written – or reportedly oral – testimony of the traumatized subject adjusts the relation between the text and its readers so that "reading is restored as an ethical practice". Ethical fiction then creates a "community of witnesses which implicitly includes the reader, so that the very act of reading comprises a mode of bearing witness" (8). In other words, Whitehead is also attracted to the capacity of trauma to force readers to share the pathos of the sufferer, of the teller of the testimony who by telling the events is well on her or his way to express all the contained emotional energy manifested in the trauma (compare Vickroy 2002: 27-35).

Obviously, trauma necessarily affects the teller of the testimony. Such notion also helps us explain why testimonies are usually full of gaps or, following the same argumentative line, why chronology is also disrupted in them. Within the context of Foer's second novel – his use of experimental devices – one may add that, like detective stories, narratives full of gaps demand a more active participation

of readers to use their imagination and fill those gaps. Narrative gaps end up being a strategy of participation, of an emotional communion that takes us to the issue of sentimentality or the hyperbolic, even extravagant use of devices to trap the reader emotionally.

However, before going back to Foer's second novel to analyze the possible presence in it of the experimental strategies so far commented, I would like to further Whitehead's main ideas about trauma fiction by mentioning that in Chapter 3 of her book this critic argues that references to the landscape may also help to absorb the shock of trauma. Space is attributed here the role of a "site of memory". Of course, in the case of Foer's book, we need to refer to the *cityscape* of New York, so intimately united to the tragedy motivated by the 9/11 attacks, a cityscape that nevertheless is not the only one strategically present in the novel.

In sum, following Whitehead's views on trauma fiction, we should evaluate the existence of strategies related to experimentation as manifested in the disruption of chronology, the presentation of narrative gaps, and the importance of space as a powerful site of memory. As side effects of trauma fiction are, of course, the engagement of the reader (now as witness) in the ethical debate and the possible eruption of a mechanism of sentimentality if the writer has attempted a too far-fetched or hyperbolic presentation of the story. Let us now consider if these strategies are traceable in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* and examine how they might relate to modernist mythic thinking and backward time.

On the use of *achronicity* and experimental strategies, it has already been stressed that Foer's second novel is very rich in experimental techniques that confuse temporality but that also enhance the visual possibilities of Oskar's story, a feature openly disliked by some reviewers. Another important device already mentioned is that Oskar's is not the only story reported in the book, nor are all the photographs shown along the narrative referred to his own making. Together with a large number of pictures, blank pages, pages with only a few words written on them, and other visual experiments carried out on a substantial part of the book,⁹ Foer's second book, as happened to the first one, presents its readers with other, conflicting or complementary, reports on the events and fortunes of the young protagonist's family. Sometimes keeping a mirrored relation with Oskar's own report, testimonies written by his grandmother compete in clarifying the readers' expectations with his grandfather's letters to his son (Oskar's father, killed in the terrorist attacks). However, the latter's documents are also a Second World

9. Most of them are techniques that strongly recollect the first great experimental novel in English, Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (1759-69).

War testimony that gradually discloses to the readers his personal tragedy. The grandfather's condition originated from different events that happened many years earlier, in a different "site of memory": Dresden in February 1945, when the combined British and American Air Forces firebombed the open German city and killed over 150.000 civilians and prisoners of war. In updated terms, we could think that the dead qualified as "collateral damage". However, secret official documents gradually released (for their "traumatic" political implications) and the writer-as-witness Kurt Vonnegut (1969: 123-125) in his most celebrated novel *Slaughterhouse-5* disclosed some decades ago that the Dresden massacre was a perfectly intended instrument of massive civilian annihilation on the part of the Allies to send the Germans a clear terror message that would force their capitulation. North American readers who may have the nerve or the critical capacity to do so, may be shocked when reflecting on Foer's use of the September 11 events – that produced the post-traumatic condition of Oskar's life – and his presentation of the reasons for his grandfather's equivalent condition. The two events, distant in time and presented fragmentarily by the two traumatized narrators, coincide in many aspects. Oskar lost his civilian father in a terror attack carried out by declared enemies of his country; his grandfather lost his family, including his girlfriend and their unborn child, in a terror attack intended to cause as much harm as possible to a civilian population.¹⁰ Temporal parallelisms and narrative fragmentation are linked here, in a reflective manner, to the different pathological effects suffered by the grandfather and by his grandson: the first one is unable to speak since the firebombing of Dresden, whereas Oskar is always talking and trying to establish communication with everybody around. The grandfather is obsessed with images of a lock and a closed door. His grandson tries to find the lock that opens a key he found by chance among his father's belongings. In between the older and the younger narrators stands the figure of the grandmother, sister to her husband's dead girlfriend and survivor of the Dresden firebombing who decided to marry him after the massacre. This time the massacre, let us not forget, is not directly referred to the Holocaust, to which Foer already dedicated his first novel, but to the German civilian population.

10. Kurt Vonnegut's novel offers no doubt about it, as its introductory chapter and the author's quoted bibliography explicitly show. Readers of *Slaughterhouse-5* may easily conclude that in his own novel Foer denounces the Allies' attack on the German city as a *terrorist* action even if the issue is not politically correct. Reviewers of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* mostly – and not surprisingly – ignored the reference to Dresden. On the notion of terrorism as a "violent communication strategy", see Clymer 2003: 14-20. The same as Vonnegut's narrator does in his novel, Oskar also refers to the American nuclear attack on Hiroshima in a school presentation (Foer 2005: 187-189).

Oskar's grandmother, unable to convince her husband to speak again, ends up with him living in an uncertain liminal space, at the airport, neither coming nor going anywhere, subtly adjusting to the fact that her husband's post-traumatic condition will never disappear, especially now that he has lost his other son in the terrorist attacks.

Space as a powerful "site of memory" is a strategy that Foer explicitly associates to the grandfather's condition. From a "magic" library where he had his first love experience – with literary echoes coming from Borges and García Márquez – after his traumatic experience motivated by the destruction of Dresden, he immigrates to the USA where for a while he lives in an apartment with his newly married wife in postwar New York. There communication with his wife is systematically impeded by his own post-traumatic stress and eventually the couple reach the compromise of sharing a number of unrealistic "Nothing Places" in their apartment (Foer 2005: 110), where their increasing lack of communication eventually leads him to abandon his wife even when she is already pregnant with Oskar's father.

On the contrary, the main task for Oskar's grandmother, as happened to the matriarch in *Everything is Illuminated*, is to establish communication and give protection to the traumatized males in her family, husband and grandson. She partakes of the supernatural powers of the female spirit of life reported by James Frazer (1922: 399-423) in his study *The Golden Bough*, a matriarchal figure abundantly re-appropriated by myth-oriented modernist and postmodernist writers. As mentioned above, such archetypical being comes from a tradition that from classical literature reached down to modernism and, within it, became the figure of the wise prophetic or guardian mother, a symbol recognizable in works that go from Eliot's *The Waste Land* to García Márquez's *Cien Años de Soledad* or Jeffrey Eugenides's *Middlesex*. Modernism, anthropology and myth amalgamate in a compassionate personage who also discloses her truth gradually. Hers is the testimony of a daughter, sister, and mother who also lost her family in two different attacks separated by 57 years but sharing the mark of terror.

The book also abounds in hyperbolic cases of communication failure that Oskar helps to restore along his quest for the meaning of the key, but it is the reader's position that allows for the only complete reading of everybody's narrative. Following the already typical patterns of trauma fiction, Foer has wisely combined testimonial elements with different subject perspectives to create a dialogical structure of witnessing that forces readers into an ethical evaluative position (compare Vickroy 2002: 27).

Along his quest for understanding, smart prodigious Oskar talks to many New Yorkers and makes us ponder about the ways they have responded to the

collective trauma generated by the 9/11 attacks. Nevertheless, beyond him Foer the artificer also makes his readers think about gratuitous death, about violence exerted against the innocents in a deadly game in which the players are rarely at risk. Perhaps for that reason, for that impossibility to ever reaching justice, Oskar wants to rewind the pictures of the man falling from one of the Twin Towers: if time could be reversed then, he concludes, "We would have been safe". However, the novel ends up in a tragic mood because time cannot be reversed, unless hypothetically, because rewinding happens only on TV or as a visual trick, because Oskar can be very smart but his father cannot be brought back to life, because his grandmother is very wise but she cannot restore her husband to pre-traumatic happiness, because the September 11 terrorists were Arabs but that should not have made Americans forget about Dresden, Hiroshima, Nagasaki or Vietnam. A novel about victims is always a story about executioners.

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