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“A Thousand of Kaleidoscopic Possibilities.” Postmemorial Agency  
in Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Tree of Codes*

Abstract

This article focuses on Jonathan Safran Foer’s book-sculpture *Tree of Codes* (2010) as a postmemorial work formally intertextual and substantially metaliterary. In particular, it investigates the conundrum of the author’s and the reader’s generative agency within a postmemorial framework by dwelling on the highly experimental format of the book. *Tree of Codes* is the result of Foer’s performative approach to Bruno Schulz’s *The Street of Crocodiles*, from which the author carved out words, sentences and even whole pages in order to let a new text surface. The cut off pieces left material voids in the pages, empty rectangles displaying the intrinsic “extra-vacancy” of postmemorial narratives and producing a sense of bewilderment in the reader. As a consequence, readers seem to be invited to complement the author’s generative act with their interpretive potential, in “a thousand of kaleidoscopic possibilities” to inhabit the empty spaces, the vacancies of the postmemorial endeavor.

“The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million – a number of possible windows not to be reckoned, rather; every one of which has been pierced, or is still pierceable in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will. These apertures, of dissimilar shape and size, hang so, all together [...]” (James 2004, 16). With these words, in the Author’s Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), Henry James conceives of the narrator’s viewpoint – or, what he calls the “posted presence of the watcher” on the “spreading field” (14) – as a “unique” and framed perspective on the novel’s subject. In other words, according to James, the “human scene” can be narrated, i.e. can become part of the house of fiction, only through the distinctive mediation of the “consciousness of the artist,” which James describes as an opening, although a restricted one, through which the world is seen and narrated – a window, indeed. These windows, James’ articulation goes on, are “holes in a dead wall, disconnected, perched aloft; they are not hinged doors opening straight upon life,” and their being indirect accesses to a subject seems to grant

their uniqueness as well as the “boundless freedom and [...] ‘moral’ reference” of the author (16).

The parallel intrinsic in the image of “the house of fiction” suggests the comprehension of narratives as artifacts, as cumulative and composite results of the act of writing understood as crafting. James’ metaphor seems, therefore, to hint at a trait that has been subsequently defined in narratology as the synthetic dimension of literature, that is the perception, on the part of readers, of narratives as artificial constructs.<sup>1</sup> In this respect, some of the questions this essay sets out to investigate are: what happens to the house of fiction when the openness of the windows is physically located inside the text? In what terms are the author’s generative act and the reader’s interpretive potential reconceived when the overture traditionally occupied by the narrator – who, from that “posted presence,” watches and then narrates the subject of choice from his or her own point of view – is repositioned inside the book, thus creating a liminal space simultaneously in and out of the narrative; a literally empty space where both the author and the reader are watchers? I will address these issues by focusing on Jonathan Safran Foer’s book-sculpture *Tree of Codes* that, thanks to its highly experimental format, interestingly reflects on the author’s and the reader’s agency – in consonance with Umberto Eco’s classical notions of *intentio auctoris* and *intentio lectoris* (Eco 1988, 154)<sup>2</sup> – specifically within the postmemorial discourse.

Indeed, *Tree of Codes* (published by Visual Editions in 2010) represents a literary and artistic endeavor that, I argue, allows the exercise of the postmemorial agency (on the part of both the author and the reader) because it deconstructs a narrative of the past by opening in it a number of apertures, of windows, within which new narratives and interpretations can ensue. In what follows, I will discuss the figurative and graphic mechanisms through which *Tree of Codes* takes

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<sup>1</sup> See James Phelan’s classic work (1996) on the synthetic dimension and function of characters. He distinguishes between three intents, synthetic (character as an artificial construct, e.g. Paul Auster’s characters); mimetic (character as a person); thematic (character as an idea). Postmodernist literature and metafiction are key examples of how the synthetic component may stress the readers’ awareness of a narrative as a construct, by betraying the mimetic illusion.

<sup>2</sup> “The functioning of a text (including non-verbal ones) can be explained by taking into account not only its generative process but also [...] the role performed by the addressee and (at most) the way in which the text foresees and directs this kind of interpretative cooperation” (Eco 1988, 148). Along these lines, I will resort to a semiotic, response-oriented approach that deals with the dynamics through which “an addressee, facing a linear textual manifestation, fills it up with a given meaning” (158). More to the point of my reasoning, “[a] text is a device conceived in order to produce its Model Reader [... who] is not the one who makes the only right conjecture. A text can foresee a Model Reader entitled to try infinite conjectures” (162), and the latter is the case with *Tree of Codes*.

to the extreme the synthetic intent of narratives and, in its transformative and performative approach towards a text, raises questions on the postmemorial act in itself. More to the point, I will posit that the practice of piercing through a narrative and of renegotiating its “eternal solidity” can be considered fundamentally postmemorial in form and substance (Foer 2002, 135). In turn, the postmemorial character may be stressed by the shattering of the mimetic illusion, and by the ontological tension between the narrative world and the actual world materialized in the “negative spaces” in the house of fiction (135). To some extent, the essence of postmemory is creating breaks in the wall of the narrative of the past in order to accommodate new perspectives.

As defined by the author himself, *Tree of Codes* is “the perfect intersection of visual arts and literature;” it is a book composed of 134 carved pages, created with the artisanal technique of the die-cutting and resulting in a text made of scattered words and rectangular holes. How were these pages carved out? Foer took Celina Wieniewska’s 1963 English translation of Bruno Schulz’s collection of short stories *The Street of Crocodiles* (originally published in Polish in 1934)<sup>3</sup> and carved out words, sentences and even whole pages from it. The cut off pieces left material voids in the pages; traces that create an aesthetically and formally unconventional narrative that brings about a sense of bewilderment in the reader.

Bruno Schulz was a Polish Jewish artist (known mainly as a writer, he was also a talented painter) who was killed in 1942 by an SS officer. In 1939 the Nazi army had invaded his hometown of Drohobycz, which is now in Ukraine, but he had decided not to flee because “he knew its streets, their houses and shops with a paralyzing intimacy;” he had resorted to remain “for the sake of the gargoylish and astonishing map his imagination had learned to draw of an invisible Drohobych contrived entirely out of language” (Ozick 1977). Much of Schulz’s art got lost in the Holocaust, including the manuscript of his final novel, thought to be also his masterpiece, *The Messiah*. After the publication in English, in the 1960s, of the few works preserved (and among them *The Street of Crocodiles*), he acquired an almost “mythical status” especially in the Jewish-American community (Goldfarb 2014). From author he became a literary figure recounted or alluded to in works such as Philip Roth’s *The Prague Orgy* (1985), Cynthia Ozick’s *The Messiah of Stockholm* (1987), David Grossman’s *See Under: Love* (1986), and Nicole Krauss’ *The History of Love* (2005); Schulz, in other words,

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<sup>3</sup> *The Street of Crocodiles* was also part of the Penguin series “Writers from the Other Europe,” edited by Philip Roth from 1974 to 1989. The selection included another work by Schulz, *Sanatorium under the Sign of the Hourglass*, as well as other Holocaust-related texts, such as Tadeusz Borowski’s *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*.

has been considered a sort of lost literary father to the displaced, postmemorial Jewish communities (Goldfarb 2014). Therefore, Foer situates his performative act on Schulz’s corpus within a cultural comprehension of the Polish author as a trope, a symbol of the Jewish artistic richness forever lost in the Holocaust, and, in this respect, a particularly apt subject for a postmemorial enterprise.

Equally central to my analysis of *Tree of Codes* is the artistic tradition of the “book-work,”<sup>4</sup> epitomized by Tom Phillips’ *A Humument* (1970 – 2016) – a re-elaboration of W.H. Mallock’s Victorian novel *A Human Document* (1892) – along whose lines Foer works in order to conceptualize what he perceives to be the unexpressed potentiality of Schulz’s art. Like *Tree of Codes*, *A Humument* is a mainly visual project that transforms a text through the erasure of a conspicuous part of its words; an act that results in the surfacing of a new text (out of the words left) that challenges and complements the original. The authors’ lexicographical take on literature frames both *Tree of Codes* and *A Humument* within a meta-literary intent that redefines the formal structure as well as the aesthetic code of the initial work. According to Jessica Pressman, in being an “artifact rather than [...] just a medium for information transmission,” *Tree of Codes* critically commemorates an important text of the past by “repurpos[ing it] in ways that focus attention not only on the particular content of the text (the data that has been lost or saved) but also on the media supporting this engagement” and, by extension, on the forms and vehicles of postmemory (97-98).

Against the background of this twofold reflection on a text connected to the canon of Holocaust literature, Foer devises a postmemorial technology that engages the memory of the past in an expressive, radical way that subverts the traditional interpretive system according to which the narrator’s viewpoint assesses the meaning of a text. Indeed, presented with the breaks within the text and the breaks with conventional reading practices, the reader’s agency gains a wider hermeneutic capacity and integrates and counters the author’s one, in a profitable triangulation between the artist, the work and the reader/viewer. As Stewart Garrett points out with reference to conceptual book sculptures, “a recognition of the book object, in all its skewing ironies of access, can at times seem inseparable from a viewer’s instinct to reconfigure in the mind’s own workshop other latent book properties worthy of similar abstraction” (xix). In other words, the intellectual labor entailed by Foer’s postmemorial book-work is

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<sup>4</sup> Stewart Garrett derives the concept of the “book-work” from the codex form understood as “conceptual *book art*.” In his discussion, “the book-work – as material object – once denied its mediating purpose as verbal text, can only be studied for the bookwork – as conceptual labor – it performs” (xiii).

necessarily inseparable from the disconcerting materiality of the book that “make[s] its mark on imagination by passing straight through craft to idea,” thus tweaking the readers “with unspoken possibilities” (xix).

The projection of “unspoken possibilities” within and through the pierced text makes *Tree of Codes* a reflective and enabling gesture that delves into the past and its heritage by “reflecting an uneasy oscillation between continuity and rupture.” It interrogates the agency of “the generation after” in dealing with the Holocaust by means of “imaginative investment, projection, and creation,” as well as of “practices of citations and supplementarity” (Hirsch 2012, 5-6). In line with book-work theory, I will focus on the form, rather than the content, of the book, by analyzing the voids created rather than the words spared, because the idiosyncratic holes inside the narrative seem to function as Barthesian *puncti* of intensity which represent “the lacerating emphasis” of the coexistence of “this will be” and “this has been,” famously exemplified by the photograph of Lewis Payne waiting in his cell to be hanged, supplied with the caption “he is dead and he is going to die” (Barthes 1981, 95-97). As a matter of fact, the breaks opened by Foer in the wall of words of *The Street of Crocodiles* vividly convey “the vertigo of Time defeated,” because they stand for the postmemorial “equivalence” between the “absolute past” of the Holocaust narrative and “the death in the future” of the memorial stance; in this lies the book’s capacity to represent and engage with the postmemorial stance gazing the unfolding of “a catastrophe which has already occurred” (Barthes 1981, 96).

The overtures inside the narrative are, in a sense, the postmemorial window in the Holocaust house of fiction. They appear as the space where authors and readers belonging to the generation after exercise their agency on the archive of the past – a dimension which, quoting from the text of *Tree of Codes*, “grows in the emptiness, [...] and where the future lay[s] open. [...] With a thousand of kaleidoscopic possibilities.” Similarly, in critiquing the project *En Camino* by Jewish Argentinian artist Mirta Kupferminc (the daughter of Holocaust survivors), Marianne Hirsch notices how the viewers “are also invited to imagine different scenarios with different beginnings and endings,” following a trajectory “mobilizing multiple potential histories on the threshold of more open-ended futures” and “complicat[ing] a genealogical temporality of loss and attempted recovery.” Crucially, “Kupferminc’s work performs the unforgiving visceral transfer of a painful past to future generations, [and yet] it allows us to glimpse the possibility of different futures – futures we, as viewers, can participate in imagining” (Hirsch 2019). The elisions in *Tree of Codes* function in a similar fashion; they activate a figurative circuit connecting the author’s and the reader’s

postmemorial agency because both are allowed to mobilize personal, non-hegemonic, unofficial interpretations over the recollection of the past (Hirsch 2019).

Therefore, the holes created by Foer comprehend and dramatize the postmemorial condition of living with the presence of an absence, crafting a narrative that I define as “extra-vacant,” meaning a narrative which is highly conscious of its being always already confronted by an experiential, existential, and ultimately ontological vacancy. Moreover, *Tree of Codes* integrates preservation (the words) and erasure (the voids), language and silence, memory and forgetfulness, thus producing a de-familiarizing effect in the reader which highlights the unsettled, postmemorial approach towards the past of this work. Also the publisher’s note in the copyright page calls attention to this opposition between presence and absence: “in order to write *Tree of Codes*, the author took an English language edition of Bruno Schulz’s *The Street of Crocodiles* and cut into its pages, carving out a new story.” The term “to write” may seem somehow at odds with the final phrase “carving out a new story;” although the juxtaposition of these two verbs points once again to the comprehension of narratives as artificially crafted, there remains an underlying tension between the act of writing as creating *ex nihilo* and that of carving out, which entails the preexistence of a matter which is then shaped into something new through the removal of some of its constituents. For sure, when it comes to literature, the friction between these two generative acts blurs, because when the Jamesian “human scene” is turned into a specific narrative, some of its aspects are inevitably lost; however, the pressure between continuity and rupture acquires an even more dramatic intent within the postmemorial sphere.

In fact, the peculiarity of *Tree of Codes* is the visual realization of this process of creation by erasure; in the Author’s Afterword entitled “This Book and The Book,” Foer claims: “For years I had wanted to create a die-cut book by erasure, a book whose meaning was exhumed from another book. [...] I was in search of a text whose erasure would somehow be a continuation of its creation” (Foer 2010). The intertextuality grounding the very *raison d’être* of “this book” – which is in conversation with the postmodern rewriting and *pastiche* – dwells on the relationship between the contemporary age and the past also proposing a dislocated and diachronic perspective on “the book,” Schulz’s text and, by extension, the legacy of the Holocaust – a practice which, I believe, shifts the dominant of the narrative from epistemological to ontological.

Dislocation and multilayered temporality, the unfolding of a catastrophe already occurred, are made explicit and even palpable by the experience of reading

*Tree of Codes*: the text can be read as any other in English (from left to right, from top to bottom), but the presence of the holes lets words from other pages poke through – an inconvenience which can be prevented by putting a white piece of paper between the page being read and the next. This book is, hence, difficult to enjoy, it requires a conscious (and careful) handling of the book-object while flipping the pages; moreover, reading for the plot is almost impossible because the narrative is weak, relying on the surrealist imaginary of Schulz’s original but being necessarily even more vague (also in consonance with its book-work character). There is no correct way to approach the text, readers can decide to look at all the words that they can see at the same time, synchronically, experiencing it in a non-linear and purely visual way. Alternatively, a tactile approach may guide the reader’s hand through the heterogeneity of the surface that counters the consistency of the paper with the void of the holes and intersperses it with the sharp edges of the rectangles where the words are encapsulated. In any way, the fruition of *Tree of Codes* is diverse and puzzling.

The cognitive tensions intrinsic in this postmemorial book-work back its extra-vacant essence and harbor its conceptual and ontological effort. The Holocaust understood as a catastrophe – from the ancient Greek *καταστροφή*, meaning “to come to an end” but also “to overturn” – may be thought not only as an epistemological fracture that seemed to have brought to an end the theoretical Western tradition, but also as a rupture that completely overturned the historical scenario of what was expected, possible, imaginable – thus generating a consequent ontological instability. In *Se questo è un uomo* (1947), Primo Levi frames in epistemological terms his reflections on the impossibility to bear witness to Auschwitz because survivors are not the true witnesses, only the dead, the drowned are integral witnesses to the concentrationary universe. Subsequently, in *I sommersi e i salvati* (1986), he ponders the mechanisms that falsify remembrance under certain conditions, so that sometimes it is impossible to establish whether an individual is aware or not of being lying and, even more importantly, may distort reality not only in memories (i.e. retrospectively), but also in the exact moment in which it is unfolding.

More radically, Giorgio Agamben in *Remnants of Auschwitz* (1999) elaborates on the constituents and circumstances of Holocaust remembrance from an ontological perspective. By stating that Auschwitz is “the devastating experience in which the impossible is forced into the real [and that] the *Muselmann* produced by Auschwitz is the catastrophe of the subject that then follows” (148), Agamben posits overturning, catastrophic questions embodied by the very

oxymoronic, ontologically ambiguous figure of the *Muselmann*, i.e. the living dead, the completely alienated inmate. Ontological instability, hence, seems to have been always part of the concentrationary universe and the act of testimony, marking a distance, a void not so much in terms of representability as in terms of existential condition, between those who wholly experienced that alternate universe and those who did not. Agamben always suggests that: “testimony is always an act of an ‘author:’ it always implies an essential duality in which an insufficiency or incapacity is completed or made valid” (150). In other words, the etymological root of “testimony” itself bears the idea of bridging a distance, of facing a void (an ontological vacuum, maybe), which makes the very existence of the testimony possible.

Postmemory further expands the distance separating the supposed “witness,” in this case the second-hand witness, from the event – a distance that is, by the very definition of “post,” impossible to fill, because the event is always already lost to those who came after it. This impossibility is made explicit in extra-vacant narratives of the Holocaust such as *Tree of Codes* which exacerbate the dialectic tension of postmemorial generations to reach and account for the catastrophe from their own historical and existential position and according to their own practices. The breaks in and with the Holocaust source turn the readers of *Tree of Codes* into postmemorial authors themselves, in an Agambian sense. Moreover, by interconnecting the *intetio of the author*, who challenged the canon by creating new spaces in it, and the *intetio of the reader*, activated in and by the blank spaces, the holes make the act of postmemorial testimony not only possible, but also effective. It seems as though postmemorial endeavors, with their extra-vacant cipher, problematize the house of fiction and the relation between author and work – outlined by James in terms of the author’s centrality and freedom with “no limit to his possible experiments, efforts, discoveries, successes” (James 1884, 3) – in that they imply and elicit the reader’s freedom to fill in the vacancies, the empty spaces.

In the Author’s Afterword of *Tree of Codes*, Foer draws a parallel between the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem and Schulz’s survived literary works, building on the idea that what survives inevitably evokes and projects its presence over the absence of what has been destroyed. In this respect, the Wailing Wall can be thought of as a site of destruction and mourning but also as a reality of new, imaginative projections. In Foer’s words, the tradition of leaving small notes of prayer in the cracks of the wall creates a “magical, unbound book,” which can be seen as a non-linear, non-hegemonic, postmemorial narrative. The wailing wall as an emblem of catastrophes, hence, may be integrated into a sphere of



imaginative investment, where, through the insertion of individual, frail notes challenging the monumentality and immutability of the solid text of history, a new “unspoken possibility” may be generated. I would suggest that, in turn, *Tree of Codes* may be experienced as a wailing wall itself, because it pays homage to the cultural and artistic heritage wiped out by the Holocaust, while creating space (in the holes/cracks) for imagination, through which contemporary, postmemorial readers can project rather than physically insert their own agencies. *Tree of Codes*, carved out of a text which was itself a remnant of a lost tradition, carves yet another break in the wall, enhancing its own and postmemory’s extra-vacant nature.

To conclude, *Tree of Codes* may be interpreted as a prototypical postmemorial enterprise because it explicitly and self-consciously (i.e. extra-vacantly) exposes the nostalgia for the lost past of the Jewish artistry as well as the anxiety for a future to be reimagined on these ruins. In particular, the material openness of the breaks allows for a formal and critical reflection on postmemorial agency on the part of both the artist and the reader: in the economy of the text, both play the role of postmemorial author.

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