

**Stories of oblivion and remembrance: transcontinental memory in the  
fiction of Jonathan Safran Foer**

**Histórias de esquecimento e recordação: memória transcontinental na  
ficção de Jonathan Safran Foer**

Fernanda Mota Alves

CENTRO DE ESTUDO COMPARATISTAS, FACULDADE DE  
LETRAS DA UNIVERSIDADE DE LISBOA

[alvesfernanda51@yahoo.de](mailto:alvesfernanda51@yahoo.de)

Foer's novels, *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002) and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), present characters that are confronted with individual or social amnesia, and narrate their efforts to cope with this situation, which is a consequence of the vicissitudes of the 20th century. The destruction of a shtetl in Ukraine, the bombing of Dresden, both during World War II, and the 9/11 attacks in New York establish the framework of human experiences which are conditioned by age and generation, culture and geographic location. Migrations and encounters reveal cultural and linguistic differences, or the refusal to speak; these conditions of a difficult communication are obstacles to the reconstruction of lost memory and require specific solutions, e.g. a catalogue of written words or the help of a translator. This search for the recovery of memory in transcultural situations implies an encompassing vision of the history and culture of the contemporary globalized world.

„Everything is the way it is because everything was the way it was“ (Foer, 2002, p. 145)

The topic “Transcultural Amnesia” suggests an approach to cultural phenomena based on the insights and instruments provided by contemporary memory studies. In fact, this research field, which has become a central paradigm in Culture Studies, has now attained a new development stage. It had its beginnings in the first decades of the 20th century, with the contributions of Maurice Halbwachs, Aby Warburg and Walter Benjamin. After the rediscovery of these authors in the 70s,<sup>1</sup> a second phase followed in the last decades of the century, starting with Pierre Nora’s *Lieux de Mémoire*; he inaugurated a period of intense research, in which the works of Jan and Aleida Assmann contributed decisively to the development of the field. The concept of cultural memory becomes then the basic research instrument for this area. However, the attachment of memory to a single cultural (national, ethnic) community which was implied in Nora’s work would soon be overcome by further theoretical approaches that stressed the dynamic nature of memory. In the words of Ann Rigney, memory is like a swimmer – it “has to keep moving even just to stay afloat”.<sup>2</sup> These reflections brought about the third phase of cultural memory studies, which abandoned the focus on the so-called “container-cultures” and started to focus on “transculturality”. According to Astrid Erll, transcultural memory studies are a field that takes on the transcultural developments of the disciplines involved in culture studies. She describes it in these words:

“I would propose using “transcultural” as an umbrella term for what in other academic contexts might be described with concepts of the transnational, diasporic, hybrid, syncretistic, postcolonial, translocal, creolized, global or cosmopolitan”<sup>3</sup>

Transcultural memory will be, then, “the incessant wandering of carriers, media, contents, forms and practices of memory, their continual “travels” and ongoing transformations through time and space, across social, linguistic and political borders.” (*Id. ibid.* p.14). Transcultural memory studies adopts a certain “*research perspective*”, which works „across and beyond“ traditional cultural (also territorial and social) borders. (*Id. Ibid.* p.14)

Transcultural memory studies must also take the hidden side of memory into consideration: remembrance is a selective process, which operates with specific contents while necessarily ignoring others. Both in individuals and communities, forgetting may take many shapes, like circumstantial loss of information, but also censorship or repression (possibly caused by a traumatic experience).

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Assmann, Aleida (1999). Cultural Studies and Historical Memories. In *The Contemporary Study of Culture* Herausgegeben von Bundesministerium für Wissenschaft und Verkehr und Internationales Forschungszentrum Kulturwissenschaften (pp. 85-99; here 92-93). Wien: TURIA+KANT

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Rigney, Ann (2008). The Dynamics of Remembrance: Texts between Monumentality and Morphing. In Astrid Erll, Ansgar Nünning (Eds.) *Cultural memory studies: an international and interdisciplinary handbook* (pp.345-356; here: p.345) Berlin: de Gruyter

<sup>3</sup> Erll, Astrid (2014). Travelling Memory. In Rick Cronshaw (Ed.), *Transcultural Memory* (pp 9-23, here: p.14) Abingdon, New York: Routledge.

Maurizio Ascari<sup>4</sup> studies several transcultural narratives which show the effects of the contemporary process of globalization. He describes them as postmodern narratives and argues that postmodernism is chronologically circumscribed by two catastrophes that left their mark in collective imagination: the Shoah (usually identified with Auschwitz) and the 9/11 attacks. The former is associated to the end of the foundational narratives of modernity and the latter represents the need to envisage the geographical proximity and the cultural distance of the Islamic East.

These are, of course, symbolic events that stand for longer processes of destabilization of Western culture and its opening to the broader context of globalization. But, in my opinion, they also present central topics of contemporary cultural memory and provide the historical framework, the theme and the orientation to many fictions of memory, and indeed, of transcultural memory, which deal with these events, in a direct or indirect manner, and according to specific points of view, depending on the geographic, social and cultural position of the author.

The Holocaust and 9/11 are precisely the central issues of the two novels published by the young Jewish-American author Jonathan Safran Foer in 2002 and 2005: *Everything is Illuminated*<sup>5</sup> and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*.<sup>6</sup> Both of them, as we shall see, represent and problematize transcultural memory and oblivion.

*Everything is Illuminated*, an autobiographic novel, has a complex narrative structure. It combines two narrative voices and three temporal levels:

Alexander Perchov, also called Alex, is a Ukrainian student who narrates the journey he has made with his grandfather and his dog, called Sammy Davis Jr Jr; they were hired to accompany Jonathan Safran Foer, an American Jew who has the author's name, in his journey in search of the shtetl Trachimbrod. He is the second narrator, who tells the story of this village from the end of the 18th century to the time of World War II, when it was bombed and destroyed. Beside the story times associated to the past of the shtetl and to the journey (which took place in the Summer of 1997), there is still another temporal level: in the autumn following that journey, Alex writes to Jonathan, who had in the meantime returned to the US, sending him his narrative.

Foer is the grandson of Safran, a Jew from Trachimbrod, who survived the destruction of the shtetl and escaped to the USA with the help of a girl called Augustine, who thus saved his life. In this journey Foer tries to find her, although he has nothing but a photograph of her and his grandfather as young people. But in fact, this journey means the return to his origins, and the attempt to face the trauma that he inherited from his late grandfather Safran. Everything he writes later about the life of the shtetl is an imaginative recreation of a reality he had not experienced and has the traits of a foundational myth.

The shtetl Trachimbrod seems to have vanished and the locals are not willing to give any information about it. Only an old woman sitting in front of her decaying house confesses that she *is* the shtetl (p. 118) – since, as we learn later, she survived the bombing and kept with her many objects left by the people who used to live there, which she collected before the Ukrainians came and pillaged what was left. Among these objects was a photo of a couple with a child and another man. Alex's grandfather

---

<sup>4</sup> Ascari, Maurizio (2011). *Literature of the Global Age: a Critical Study of Transcultural Narratives*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland

<sup>5</sup> Foer, Jonathan Safran (2002). *Everything Is Illuminated*. London e.a.: Penguin

<sup>6</sup> Foer, Jonathan Safran (2005). *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin Company

is identified as the married man in the picture and he confesses he identified his friend Herschel, the other man in the picture, as a Jew, and is therefore responsible for his death.

This brief account of the central elements of this story allow us already to understand how it is based on silence and oblivion and on the efforts to finally face the past. In fact, Jonathan and Alex are symmetrical figures, both of them belonging to the third generation after World War II. In spite of their nationalities, they are the heirs of opposite social communities in Ukraine, the Jews and the gentile.

Jonathan, the grandson of the surviving Jew Safran from Trachimbrod, came to Ukraine to build his identity on the ruins of his family's past. He never found Augustine. Instead, he met her cousin Lista, the old woman who gave him access to some information of the past, both of his grandfather and of Trachimbrod. He narrates the story of the shtetl, starting with the myth that gave it its name but also tells the origin and life of his remote grandmother Brod – a baby floating in the water, surrounded by objects of all kinds after the accident that killed its family in the river. Jonathan thus presents an allegory of his own memory work, which consists of assembling fragments from the obscure realm of the repressed past to construct the image he needs to live with in the present.

Alex in turn is the older son of a dysfunctional Ukrainian family. His father is a violent man who mistreats his wife and sons; his grandfather, who is disturbed by the death of his wife, says he is blind and still continues to drive. At the beginning of the novel, Alex dreams of going to the US and imagines a lifestyle made up of American stereotypes. He also presents himself as he would like to be: a successful young male who is adored by the girls and spends much money in trendy night clubs - in fact these are fictions he tells his younger brother and Jonathan in order to make himself seem a worthier or more interesting person. In his account of the journey with Jonathan and in his letters he uses the English vocabulary in a completely inadequate way, which contributes to a comic effect that is paralleled by his humoristic attitude. At some point he says humour is the best way to cope with the negative aspects of human experience. In fact, he will narrate the tragedy that lies in the past of his family. According to historic accounts, the Ukrainians supported actively the Nazis in the elimination of the Jews, and they seem to have silenced this fact until the present.<sup>7</sup> So, in some way, Alex must have the notion that he was on the side of the survivors who witnessed the massacre of the Jews. But as the story evolves, he narrates a still crueller story, which concerns him on a personal, indeed biological level. After being recognized in the photo with his wife and Herschel, the Grandfather confesses that to save his own family he had to identify his friend as a Jew to the Nazis, thereby condemning him to death. This story becomes even more complex; comparing this confession with a comment made by Lista/Augustine saying Eli killed Herschel, one must necessarily conclude that the Grandfather is not a Ukrainian but a Jew in self-denial, something Jonathan prefers not to acknowledge, for the sake of a clear distinction between victims and perpetrators.

The plot of this novel thus tends to uncover hidden facts and bring them to consciousness – the destiny of Jonathan's grandfather Safran, the guilt of Alex's Grandfather, and even the emotional development of Alex, who in the end was able to face his identity and his truth. This is the „illumination“ the book refers to. On the other hand, the lack of information led to imaginative reconstruction – in this sense, Jonathan's story can be seen as an example of postmemorial imagination (using the

---

<sup>7</sup> When Alex asks the peasants about Trachimbrod, they refuse to acknowledge that the shtetl ever existed.

concept proposed by Marianne Hirsch<sup>8</sup>). There are, however, elements of this story that remain in silence. The shtetl Trachimbord disappeared totally, leaving in its place the dark spectre of its absence; even the narration of its bombing remains indirect: dotted lines allude to the unspeakable. The Ukrainians of the neighbourhood deliberately forget that place and refuse to remember where it used to be located. Trauma and guilt contribute to selective amnesia.

Jonathan, the American Jew, and Alex, the Ukrainian heir of the curse of a Jew who was forced into the condition that Primo Levi called the grey zone, produce together a book. This is the wish formulated by Alex when he asks: „With our writing, we are reminding each other of things. We are making one story, yes?“ (Foer 2002, p. 144). Alex would like this book to be a token of reconciliation and forgiveness, which would eliminate his grandfather’s guilt in the realm of fiction. In his words, “with writing we have second chances“ (*id. ibid.* p. 144). In fact, Jonathan does not seem to react to this proposal, which means that he suspends the implicit offer of forgiveness and reconciliation. But the sheer existence of this book means that this transcontinental encounter, which had depended on the contribution of Alex as a guide and translator, resulted in a partial remembrance that made it possible to finally mourn.

Foer's second novel is mainly narrated by a nine years old boy, Oscar Schell, whose father died in the 9/11 attacks. He was not able to answer the phone when his father called several times shortly before the towers collapsed and both his father's death and this episode, which he keeps secret, are at the core of a trauma that disturbs him in the next two years. He finds a key in his father's closet with a label saying Black and he starts a search in New York for the person related to that name. He has then the opportunity of knowing many individual stories, which offer the reader personal perspectives of urban life and ways of coping with the recent catastrophe.

The novel has a second narrative stream: Oscar's grandparents are Germans who sought refuge in the US after World War II. The bombing of Dresden killed Anna, Thomas’ bride, who had just told him she was pregnant. He eventually married Anna's sister, who was equally disturbed by the loss she had suffered. Thomas Schell lost his ability to speak and communicated with a set of words he had written in a notebook, while he had the words *yes* and *no* written on his palms.

The novel establishes a connection between the recent events and the atrocities committed during the World War II; but here the readers’ attention is clearly drawn towards the suffering of German people. This unsettles the stereotypes created by the most current versions of cultural memory, which present the Germans only as perpetrators: Thomas Schell's account of the chaos and despair that followed the bombing is intensely emotional and oriented towards an empathic reading. On the other hand, the shadow of the Holocaust is also present in the figure of a man called Simon Goldberg, a Jewish friend who Anna’s father was hiding from the Nazis. Later he wrote Thomas a letter from the transit-camp Westerbork and the informed reader will assume that he must have been sent to be killed in Auschwitz. However, Thomas thinks he may have seen him in a bookshop in Manhattan. At the same time, the reference to the bombings of Dresden and also Hiroshima offers a more problematic view of the Americans, who have also been responsible for destructive acts against innocent populations and are now the victims of analogous actions.<sup>9</sup> It is Goldberg's remark on the war that summarizes this confrontation of different positions of perpetrators and victims and, indeed, their interchangeability, asserting the senselessness of violence:

---

<sup>8</sup> Hirsch, Marianne (1997). Mourning and Postmemory. In Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames – Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (pp.17-25). Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Codde, Philippe (2011). Keeping History at Bay: Absent Presences in Three Recent Jewish American Novels. *Modern Fiction Studies* Volume 57, Number 4, 673-693, here p. 682.

„We go on killing each other to no purpose! It is war waged by humanity against humanity, and it will only end when there’s no one left to fight!” (p. 128). This novel enacts a transcultural memory that has in its core the compassion for all human (and also animal) suffering.

The practical and emotional need to communicate is a central element in both novels. In *Everything is Illuminated* language is central to the extent that Jonathan needs a translator to accompany him in his search; but the narrated stories, for the fact that they are the verbal expression of repressed or inexistent memories (that had been the object of what one could call transcultural amnesia), are as close as the book can come to mutual understanding and acceptance among the main characters and what these represent.

In *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* verbal language does not seem to be a reliable or at least sufficient instrument of communication. The fiction includes a scrapbook composed by Oscar (“Stuff that happened to me”), uses photos and images and even a flipbook that performs an inversion of time intended to undo Oscar’s terrible loss. It also depicts Thomas Schell’s intensively communicative efforts that result in pages totally covered by a text which is so dense that it became illegible; conversely, it shows how Oscar’s grandmother writes the story of her life for him and only produces blank pages, which is her response to her trauma.<sup>10</sup> In the hands of Thomas Schell language objectifies itself to the extent of becoming a body.

It is significant that Oscar and his grandfather go together to the cemetery in the night to open the empty coffin that had been symbolically buried in honour of Oscar’s father (Thomas’ son). They leave inside the coffin all the unsent letters that Thomas had written to his son, and this is the beginning of Oscar’s healing process. Thomas, in turn, will never recover from his trauma.

The role of language and textuality in this novel extends to the meaning of literary fiction itself: In a letter sent by Stephen Hawking to Oscar, he confesses that he would prefer to have become a poet than a scientist because inventiveness is closer to real life.

Literary imagination is presented in these texts as the medium to remember repressed memories, speak the unspeakable and reveal the universality of human frailty.

---

<sup>10</sup> Atchinson refers to this as “the absence in presence through silence”. Atchinson, S. Todd (2010) “Why I am writing from where you are not”: Absence and Presence in Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 46, 359-368.