The Art of Erasure: On *Tree of Codes*

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*The origin of a story is always an absence.*
—Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything is Illuminated*

Jewish-American writer Jonathan Safran Foer’s most recent novel, the 2010 *Tree of Codes*, is a strange but beautiful book. It belongs to an exclusive genre in which the author has not written a single word, yet his voice is undeniably present throughout. *Tree of Codes* is a die-cut redaction of Foer’s favorite book, *The Street of Crocodiles*, a 1934 collection of magical-realist short stories by the Polish-Jewish author Bruno Schulz, who was murdered in a Jewish ghetto in 1942. His stories, written in Polish, were collected under the title *Sklepy cynamonowe*, “Cinnamon Shops,” and translated into English by Celina Wieniewska in 1963. Due to *Tree of Codes*’ unique form (the publisher calls it a “sculptural object”), the book received few reviews and is relatively unknown outside the worlds of craft publishing, Polish-Jewish studies, and the academic subfield known as “object-oriented ontology.”

I have previously called for taking Foer seriously as a writer of the human response to catastrophe.² Yet *Tree of Codes*, because of its unique form, does not admit one way of reading, much less interpreting. Still, it is worth considering how powerfully this book resonates with Foer’s earlier creative works borne out of historical traumas. In fact, I’ll argue that *Tree of Codes* is Foer’s novelistic practice.
made literal, working through the absences left behind by historical traumas by presenting them as absences.

Designed by Visual Editions, a small London-based publishing house, and published by a specialty printer in Belgium, Tree of Codes is a page-for-page copy of the English translation of Schulz’s The Street of Crocodiles, but with the paragraphs on each page removed by die-cuts except for a choice few words and phrases—about one tenth the original number—turning the pages into a delicate lace. Looking at the first page—or rather through it, as all its words have been excised—one sees a jumble of holes and parts of words poking through from the pages below. But looking at each page by itself, one sees that on the front side of each page reads a story in full, grammatical English, save for capitalization. That is, Foer created his own novel out of Schulz’s, using the same words and punctuation, but giving them an entirely new context and meaning. Just as the phrase “tree of codes” emerges from a redaction of “street of crocodiles,” the work itself is, in Foer’s words, “a book whose meaning was exhumed from another book.” Foer thus weaves words and phrases from Schulz’s separate short stories into one unified narrative.

Critics have noted that Tree of Codes was created in a digital context. A leading figure of the subfield of literary studies known as object-oriented ontology, N. Katherine Hayles, detects in many contemporary novels like Foer’s an “anxiety about the continued life of books and a desire to reassert the book’s authority in the face of the exponential expansion of the Web and the ongoing conversion of books into digitized texts.” Tree of Codes indeed prompts us to question the digitalization of books; it would lose half its meaning if read on a Kindle. Hayles thus includes it among contemporary books that “displace some degree of narrative complexity from the semantic register of words to the physical forms they present.” Shockingly for a best-selling author like Foer, the book is already out of print, and no digital edition exists.

Also important, however, is Tree of Codes’s context as a tribute to Schulz, who was murdered in the Holocaust. Now considered one of the greatest Polish modernists, during his lifetime Schulz was a high school drawing and handicrafts teacher in the small town of

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Drohobycz in southern Poland (now Ukraine). In addition to two volumes of fiction, he produced thousands of sketches. His Book of Idolatry, a graphic narrative, brings together caricatures of Eastern European Jews, shoe fetishes, and sadomasochistic fantasies. Connected with literary circles across Europe, Schulz corresponded with Franz Kafka and translated The Trial into Polish. Yet by 1941, as the Nazis invaded Poland, Schulz, a Jew, was confined to the Drohobycz ghetto. For a time, a Nazi officer protected him in exchange for Schulz painting murals in his home. Fragments, depicting dwarves and fairies which he painted under coercion, are now, after great controversy, on display in Israel’s Yad Vashem Holocaust museum. In November 1942, while bringing home a loaf of bread, Schulz was shot in the streets of Drohobycz by a rival officer of Schulz’s “protector.”

In his afterword to Tree of Codes, Foer writes of Schulz’s slim volumes of extant work, “Their long shadow—the lost work of history—is, in many ways, the story of the century,” the generation of Jewish culture, including Schulz, wiped out in the Holocaust. Yet the temptation of revisiting the “shadow” of the work of Bruno Schulz is to flatten it out into “Holocaust writing,” with the plight of its author overshadowing the text itself. This effect is immediately clear in Tree of Codes. The Street of Crocodiles bursts with mythic, childlike possibility, with the narrator’s father emulating, and eventually metamorphosing into, a bird and a cockroach. In another scene, Father overturns huge rolls of brightly colored cloth in his shop, letting loose a sea of raw material that he shapes into a detailed landscape over which he rules like the Biblical figure of Moses. Tree of Codes, on the other hand, evokes suffering and erasure. Told from the perspective of a young boy, the story centers on the initially odd but increasingly psychotic character of his father, who metamorphoses
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into objects and ultimately disappears.

At first, *Tree of Codes* thus seems complicit in performing a reductive, Holocaust-dominated reading of Schulz: Father seems to represent the vitality of prewar Jewish life sapped by the Holocaust. The text uses holes in the page to make physical the words lost by Schulz’s premature death, including the manuscript of his purported magnum opus, *The Messiah*—whose loss has since prompted experimental reconstructions from Philip Roth, Cynthia Ozick, David Grossman, and Chicago’s own Aleksander Hemon. Compared to these more traditional homages, Hayles mockingly imagines Foer’s proposal to Schulz’s literary estate for their eventual “blessing” of his project: “I plan to rip the guts out of Schulz’s text, erasing ninety percent of his words and eradicating everything that has made his stories objects of perennial fascination.” Foer’s project was obviously born out of reverence, not malice. Still, is it marred by the violence to Schulz’s text it entails? By considering *Tree of Codes* alongside Foer’s other responses to catastrophe, I will argue that the text is a compelling and inspired reuse of Schulz’s literary heritage.

THE COMPULSION TO WRITE THE CATASTROPHE

It makes sense to read *Tree of Codes* alongside Foer’s first novel, *Everything is Illuminated*, which bears clear influence from Schulz in its magical-realist style. The novel is also autobiographical. In a 2003 interview, Foer confirmed that the basic plot of *Everything is Illuminated* is true to his own relation to the Holocaust. Foer’s Ukrainian-born Jewish grandfather was saved from extermination by an unnamed Ukrainian woman. One summer, while he was a student at Princeton, Foer drove across Ukraine to search for her. Foer described his findings, or lack thereof: “I did go, and I just found—nothing. At all. It wasn’t like a literary, interesting kind of nothing, an inspiring, or a beautiful nothing, it was really like: nothing. It’s not like anything else I’ve ever experienced in my life.”

*Everything Is Illuminated* grew out of this experience, preserving this void but also drawing inspiration from it. Foer abandons the task of reconstructing the events in question because what was lost so vastly exceeds what one could ever represent. His grandfather lost his daughter and wife in the Holocaust, and that loss is the starting


point of Foer's creation.

Crucial here is the fact that Foer's grandfather died long before he was born, so even the story of his grandfather's survival was a step removed from the author. Thus structural trauma, to use Dominick LaCapra's term, and not historical, or experienced, trauma, motivated Foer to write about the Holocaust. 7 Literary scholar Philippe Codde considers Foer representative of third-generation Holocaust victims, “those who were not directly affected by the event, but who nevertheless seem to carry the burden of this traumatic past.” 8 While the second generation had to live with the ramifications of trauma through their parents, third-generation writers like Foer chose to reawaken that trauma and, to use Freud's term, work through it. Codde notes that following generations can remain haunted by the trauma “due to the obsession that arises with the black hole, the hidden horror in their family history.” Codde quotes Dina Wardi: “Their [parents’] silence left a terrible vacuum in the children's hearts, and they had no choice but to fill it with fantasies and dreams that they wove out of fragments of information.”

Foer uses voids as a means of representation, recalling Jacques Derrida's concept of the trace: in Codde's words, “spectral elements that are at once concealed and discernable within the text as absent presences.” Foer's earlier works, Everything is Illuminated and Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close, also use fragmented styles and structures, such as blank pages or words printed over each other, but these are made concrete in Tree of Codes, with its physical voids and linguistic fragments. While most Holocaust literature attempts to represent a certain historical past, Foer shows us a more self-conscious way to remember, by maintaining our distance—remembering that no matter how much we might empathize with victims, we cannot ever fully imagine their experiences. Yet as the character Jonathan narrates in Everything Is Illuminated, “The origin of a story is always an absence,” and he writes as if he had no choice but to fill that absence with narratives spun from the scraps of information that remained. LaCapra would consider this a healthy response to trauma in that it starts by “acknowledging and affirming, or working through, absence as absence,” rather than mistaking ancestral loss for one's own and thinking of oneself as a victim. 9
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Foer’s strategy is imaginative, entering what Marianne Hirsch has termed the realm of “postmemory,” since memory here “is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation...dominated by narratives that preceded [his] birth.” Though Schulz’s own writing is not a Holocaust narrative, Foer responds to it as a “witness through the imagination,” to use Norma Rosen’s term. Rather than drawing from Schulz’s biography as many others have, Foer recalls Schulz on imaginative literary terms. Foer’s approach of adding distance between reader and text ultimately turns the reader’s imagination to what was lost, in this case pointing back to Schulz.

TREE OF CODES’S SCHULZIAN AIMS

In his afterword, Foer links Tree of Codes to the story of the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem:

It’s been tradition, ever since, for Jews to leave small notes of prayer in the cracks of the wall. It could be said that these form a kind of magical, unbound book, conjuring the enormity of the desperation of the world, the needs we haven’t defeated.

Following discussion of Schulz’s murder in the streets of the Drohobycz ghetto, Foer continues:

Like the Wailing Wall, Schulz’s surviving work evokes all that was destroyed in the War: Schulz’s lost books, drawings and paintings; those that he would have made had he survived; the millions of other victims, and within them the infinite expressions of infinite thoughts and feelings taking infinite forms.

Or is Schulz’s work more like a bound version of those disparate prayers left in the wall?

By comparing Schulz’s original work to a bundle of prayers, a creative adaption of tradition, even in the fragmentary form of Tree of Codes, extends the line of that tradition. Tree of Codes literally gives Schulz’s work a second life.
Foer explains in the afterword that he had wanted for many years to make a die-cut book, but that from trying the process out on “the dictionary, the encyclopedia... various works of fiction...those options would have merely spoken of the process...I was in search of a text whose erasure would somehow be a continuation of its creation.” It took Foer over a year to decide on *The Street of Crocodiles* because “so many of Schulz’s sentences feel elemental, unbreakdownable.” And so *Tree of Codes* preserves, erases, creates all at once: “At times I felt like I was making a gravestone rubbing of *The Street of Crocodiles*, and at times that I was transcribing a dream that *The Street of Crocodiles* might have had.”

Foer concludes that *Tree of Codes* “is a story in its own right, but it is not exactly a work of fiction. It is yet another note left in the cracks of the wall.” Foer even describes Schulz’s fiction itself as too precarious and magical to be the product of ordinary writing; instead he imagines it “exhumed” from a larger text, like that of Schulz’s short story “The Book,” in which a magical book exudes shifting, dreamlike stories and images, different each time the narrator, a young boy, opens it, until it disintegrates into scraps of tissue. Foer writes: “It is from this imagined larger book, this ultimate book, that every word ever written, spoke or thought is exhumed. *The Book of Life* is the Temple that our lives strive to enter, but instead only conjure.” Yet when the boy asks his father years later what happened to The Book, he replies, “The Book is a myth in which we believe when we are young, but which we cease to take seriously as we get older.” Schulz and Foer apparently forgot to grow up.

Schulz’s mythology of the explosive potential of literary creation resonates deeply with Foer. Foer writes in his foreword to *The Street of Crocodiles*, quoting Schulz:
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There are things, Schulz wrote, “that cannot ever occur with any precision. They are too big and too magnificent to be contained in mere facts. They are merely trying to occur, they are checking whether the ground of reality can carry them. And they quickly withdraw, fearing to lose their integrity in the frailty of realization.” Our lives, the big and the magnificent lives we can just barely make out beneath the mere facts of our lifestyles, are always trying to occur. But save for a few rare occasions—falling in love, the birth of a child, the death of a parent, a revelatory moment in nature—they don’t occur; the big magnificence is withdrawn. Stories rub at the facts of our lives. They give us access—if only for a few hour, if only in bed at the end of the day—to what’s beneath.11

Foer possesses Schulz’s eye for the chance reality that does not occur, and strives to keep it alive through storytelling. He “rubs at” The Street of Crocodiles the way Schulz’s narrator rubs at the mythical and explosive book in “The Book.” Yet Schulz wrote that he wanted to look his reader “straight in the eye” and try to communicate his meaning directly: “For, under the imaginary table that separates me from my readers, don’t we secretly clasp each other’s hands?” This sense of intimacy is glaringly absent from Foer’s depersonalized redaction.

The greatest difference between Schulz’s text and Tree of Codes, though both are limited to the same vocabulary, is the inevitability of reading the former through the lens of Schulz’s tragic death, which is inextricable from Foer’s project. This reframes Tree of Codes’s frequent references to suffering, loss, and destruction as allusions to the Holocaust, highlighted by deliberate excision from Schulz’s pre-Holocaust work. Though Tree of Codes retains the rudiments of Schulz’s Father character’s metaphysics of spontaneous creation and metamorphosis, in Foer’s version it is tinged with destructive undertones.

Whereas stepping into a mythological, precarious realm promises salvation in Schulz’s, it suggests erasure in Foer’s creation: “we stepped into the shadow and did not fight against it.” Schulz’s
innocuous phrases take on ominous weight, recalling the calm and false sense of trust seen in Holocaust memoirs that the war would be over before deportations begin: “[Mother’s] boundaries held only loosely, ready to scatter as if smoke...There was something tragic in fighting the borders, the heroism of shortcomings.” Father is likewise “condemned to float eternally,” for Mother “had condemned him to mirrors.” Such phrases preserve Schulz’s claim that “There is no dead matter,” but now taken on valences of the disposability of persons.

Foer finds tragedy where Schulz finds exhilaration in, for instance, the uncanny phrase “memories which would suddenly blow away.” Whereas Schulz’s Jewish origin was of almost accidental significance for most of his life, it haunted him during the Holocaust: “hideously enlarged shadows attached to my father” echoes the damning label of Jewish origin. This continues with the trope of masks, a metaphor for Jewish appearances, which appear in Schulz’s sketches. The masks first worn innocently by children in Schulz later afflict Foer’s Father: “No human could bear such a tragic mask. He would run to a corner of a room and shake. He no longer possessed resistance. Instead of fighting, he subjected to the fear and sadness.” Whereas Schulz’s Father constantly collects and creates, Foer’s withdraws into “a dialogue swollen with darkness,” caught “in dull suffering that does not know why it must be what it is, arbitrary tyranny for which there is no outlet.” Father’s “disappearance,” due in Foer’s version to illness, echoes the state of starving Jews in the ghettos awaiting deportation:

He used to disappear for many days into some corner and these disappearances ceased to make any impression on us, we did not count him one of us anymore. Knot by knot, he loosened himself, as unremarked as the gray heap swept into a corner, waiting to be taken.

Such language of objectification recalls Primo Levi’s concept of the Muselmann (literally, “Muslim”), the prisoners in Auschwitz who were starved to the point that they were no longer living in any meaningful sense. This situates Holocaust victims in simultaneous existence and nonexistence, turning into objects—in Tree of Codes's
words, “reduced to the indispensable minimum.” Numerous passages recall images found in Holocaust literature: “in the depth of the grayness, weeks passed...we were full of aimless endless darkness. Mother burned in the farthest rooms” and “we used pieces of bread to wipe up the remains of nothing and it did not matter.” Tree of Codes traces a descent from life into dead matter—a slow, uneasy path at the end of which “we felt Betrayed, surrendered.”

Foer later reworks one of Father’s monologues: “Father would say, ‘How beautiful is forgetting! what relief it would be for the world to lose some of its contents!’” While the second phrase is from Schulz, it takes on new significance in light of the horrors of the Holocaust that one would rather be able to forget. New phrases like “An enormous last day of life” and “a transcendental hour a moment forever” seem to go against Schulz’s philosophy of the deathlessness of matter, frozen within the memory in horror. While Foer preserves, “But the future lay open, a thousand kaleidoscopic possibilities,” these are no longer magical possibilities but rather “an awkward, undecided direction, a shaky and uncertain line of indefinite sadness”—evoking the existential problem, to use Theodor Adorno’s phrase, of how one can live after Auschwitz. Reaching back to Foer’s biography, the narrator’s line to his mother, “‘Why did you not tell me,’ I whispered, crying,” recalls third-generation frustration at the silence of earlier generations’ shame about the Holocaust.

And yet Foer preserves several key Schulzian elements. A certain danger receding into its corner “restored normal and the urge to joy. Something stirred in me the feeling of no permanence in life transformed into an attempt to express wonder.” Here, Foer suggests the resilience of Schulz’s mythology of creation even after the Holocaust. As Foer’s character Alex says in Everything Is Illuminated, “With writing, we have second chances.”
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THE AUTHOR-READER RELATIONSHIP AND MORAL TRUTH

In Foer’s *Everything Is Illuminated*, Jonathan and Alex, Jonathan’s Ukrainian translator, develop a shared “nomadic truth” through writing. Their initially opposite perspectives on the Holocaust are ultimately bridged through a literary relationship. In a moment of awareness that his relationship with Jonathan goes beyond the content of their letters, Alex writes to Jonathan:

*Let us not praise or reproach. Let us not judge at all. We are outside of that already. We are talking now, Jonathan, together; and not apart. We are with each other, working on the same story, and I am certain that you can also feel it.*

Correspondence is more than a compilation of perspectives; it builds a moral bridge. Similarly, Schulz wrote in a letter to two friends: “I need a friend. I need the closeness of a kindred spirit. I long for some outside affirmation of the inner world whose existence I postulate...I need a partner for voyages of discovery...Maybe we’ll dream something up together.” Foer similarly sees an interpersonal dimension, a need to connect, behind all literary creation.

One wonders, then, about the relationship Foer sought with Schulz. One passage in *Tree of Codes* seems to recall Foer seeking his own family history in Ukraine:

I submitted to the passion of pursuing trembling. I set out like a castaway. Groping blindly in the darkness and pushing deep to explore against the current, I woke up as does a sleeping passenger when the train stops at a station. Out of the depth of yesterday I wanted to turn inside out. I wrote in a notebook, added it all up...I could not contain the groaning, swelling, deep pulsation of the enormous awe, those colossal exuberances... Shaken into consciousness, I was a vigilant observer of the secret gnawing life.

Foer’s project of seeking meaning in the traces of the Holocaust is, like Schulz’s pursuit of a hidden reality, most distinguished by

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its incompleteness. Foer continues, “All I wanted was to be unsure. I found myself lost.” Unlike so many other writers who fit their stories into received narratives about the Holocaust, Foer’s reflects a morally undetermined world just as Schulz’s reflects a physically undetermined one. For Schulz, it is a question of reevaluating appearances, while for Foer it is about creating anew out of the deceptive appearances of testimony. Foer writes in *Tree of Codes*, “Truth is not a decisive factor”; yet, shortly after, “Our hunger is to succumb.” To that I would add that our hunger is to oversimplify deeply complex narratives—ones which have no clearly articulable truth.

If we read *Tree of Codes* as a third-generation Holocaust text, Foer tells us what he intended with his project: “When writing these tales about my father, I surrender to the secret hope that they will merge into the rustle of pages and be absorbed there,” in “the great book of catastrophes, copied a thousand times, incessant draft, relentless, flowing bleeding.” Foer’s works will never replace first-person Holocaust memoirs, but they will merge into those stories and color them with complexity, even if they create holes—even literal ones—in the original in the process. Whatever violence Foer does to Schulz’s work in *Tree of Codes*, he preserves an homage to his literary father: at the end of the world, “my father was the only one who knew a secret escape.” Schulz’s mythological toolbox ultimately grants Foer the possibility of remembering by creating. *Tree of Codes* serves as a powerful model for trusting oneself to imagine a lost truth, even if one may never find it. Foer recovers Schulz’s phrase, “reality is as thin as paper,” putting the real and the written closer than one thought possible.