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Incredibly close encounters: magical realism and the intimate elegies of Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is illuminated and Extremely loud and incredibly close*

Abstract:

This paper will investigate the relationship between prose elegy and magical realism in Jonathan Safran Foer's novels *Everything is illuminated and Extremely loud and incredibly close*. It will propose that absence is generative and that the state of melancholia – or unsuccessful, unresolved grief – is conducive to creativity.

Critics such as Francisco Collado-Rodriguez (2008), Alan Berger (2010) and Jenni Adams (2011) have focused on the ethics of writing third-generational, post-testimonial Holocaust fiction, and the inheritance of trauma or traumatic memory in Foer's novels. While these critics consider Foer's magical-realist tendencies, what remains unexplored or unsaid in their work is the elegiac nature of his creativity. During his recent visit to Australia (The Wheeler Centre, Melbourne 2011), Foer described how: 'There were things my grandmother was unable to talk about … my mother inherited those silences and I inherited those silences and my kids will inherit those silences'. While these silences also attest to the unsayable nature of traumatic events of the past – such as, in Foer's fiction, the Holocaust – this paper will examine these absences within an elegiac framework, considering a relationship between melancholia and creativity. While this grief is not something Foer has experienced firsthand, its presence has haunted his childhood and, consequently, persists as a haunting presence in his fictional works.

Everything is illuminated and *Extremely loud and incredibly close* represent, respectively, the Holocaust, the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Dresden bombings of World War II. In both works, Foer structures his narratives around generations. Not only does this structure demonstrate the way trauma is passed down through families, even in the form of silences or questions, it allows the author to create in his work what Philippe Codde describes as 'postmemorial invention' (2011, 677); to reimagine, out of an absence, what has been lost. Brooke Davis (2009) contends that 'grieving writers … may have access to a culturally accepted space for grief that the general population does not'. Magical realism, this paper will propose, allows Foer access to this difficult, unreachable space in a way that the stylistics of literary realism would not.

Kelly Walsh identifies the elegy by its 'irrepressible compulsion to give some figure to what has been lost' (2009, 2). This compulsion, I will argue, is integral to Foer's novels. With specific attention to the way Foer's magical-realist fiction compensates by overcompensating – confronting felt absences, loss and intergenerational grief with fantasy, hyperbole and impossible intimacies – this paper will examine how the elegiac manifests in creative forms.

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Introduction

Magical-realist texts are peopled by ghosts and preoccupied by gaps and absences. From the baby ghost in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (2007) to the unacknowledged massacred plantation workers in Gabriel García Márquez's *One hundred years of solitude* (1978), magical-realist literature is known for its interest in representing marginalised perspectives and experiences not accounted for in mainstream versions of history.

Recent scholarship has also linked magical realism to a felt or virtual reality, specifically in relation to the representation of traumatic events. Cathy Caruth (1995; 1996) is among a number of critics who highlight the difficulty in narrating trauma. Likewise, Eugene L Arva's recent study, *The traumatic imagination: histories of violence in magical-realist fiction* (2011), focuses on the way traumatic experiences elude linguistic or textual representation. Magical realism, Arva posits, 'gives traumatic events an expression that traditional realism could not … because magical-realist images and traumatised subjects share the same ontological ground, being part of a reality that is constantly escaping witnessing through telling' (6). Similarly, in response to Arundhati Roy's magical-realist novel *The god of small things* (1997), Elizabeth Outka contends that 'to stay true to traumatic experience … writers cannot represent trauma; they can only convey the *effects* of trauma in their work' (2011, 33; my emphasis).

What remains unsaid in the majority of recent studies, however, is the elegiac nature of magical-realist literature. This is, in a sense, surprising given the burgeoning field of elegiac fiction and the ghosts and felt or confronted absences that populate magical-realist texts, as highlighted above. Indeed, magical-realist narratives frequently address violent and traumatic events of the past, and the tragic nature of these events imply an associated sense of loss, longing and mourning on the part of both the characters and, often, the books' authors.

In regards to such representations of the past, critic Priscila Uppal highlights the imaginative and at times subversive nature of the elegy. In her study of the Canadian elegy, *We Are What We Mourn: The Contemporary English-Canadian Elegy*, Uppal argues that, 'for poets who wish to contradict, refute or inform official histories, thereby also subverting conventional inheritances, the work of mourning is performed to create alternative attachments to those offered by official history' (2009, 119). As Uppal highlights, the poetics of elegy are often interventionist or interfering, using language to interact, engage with and even alter narratives about the past by communicating – through text – with something or someone lost or deceased.

 Likewise, magical-realist texts subvert dominant discourses in order to correct them. Through its refusal to legitimise a distinction between the marvellous and the real, the mode demonstrates that all narrative is a construct and that literary realism is a hoax capable of misleading readers into accepting lies about reality. Accordingly, not only does Uppal's argument provide room for an elegiac reading of magical-realist texts, this paper will suggest that with its often-subversive aims and political agenda, magical realism itself is inherently elegiac, or at least aligned with the desires of the elegy. It is a form that, as Uppal attests, is often also subversive and political.

In this paper, I will contend that the magical-realist techniques employed by Foer in *Everything is Illuminated and Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* construct elegiac space. Rather than providing consolation, Foer's writing facilitates the construction of spaces for continued relationships with the dead as well as with the past, including historical events such as the Holocaust and the Dresden bombings. The elegiac qualities of Foer's magical-realist fictions not only make the absent present, but also interrogate ideas about memory, testing the capacities of language and the possibility of recreating narratives or knowledge about the past.

Elegiac spaces: melancholia and creativity

According to critics such as Arva (2011), magical realism opens a space for that which cannot be expressed, or for that which is difficult to express. At the same time, antirealist narratives such as Foer's acknowledge the impossible, unsayable nature of not just trauma, but grief – especially a grief that the author has not experienced first-hand. Indeed, Foer acknowledges these silences or absences as 'felt', as handed down through his family. Consequently, his narratives are interested in how the past is experienced now; they convey the ineffable nature of inherited grief. During a recent visit to Australia (2011), Foer described his first novel, *Everything is illuminated*, as a novel for his grandmother: 'I realised … that it really was a book in many ways about her and also in many ways for her' (The Wheeler Centre, Melbourne). By fictionalising his experiences and his family's 'inherited silences', Foer is able to produce an unreal and therefore negotiable space in which he can access the past and perhaps thus also seek to control it in some way.

Sigmund Freud's essay, 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1917), is a foundational text for elegy theorists, who often use his theoretical framework as starting point or, alternatively, as a point of departure. According to Freud's paper, healthy or successful mourning comes to a decisive end when the mourning person accepts consolation for the loss or lost object. Melancholia, on the other hand, demonstrates the bereaved person's refusal to relinquish the dead. Tammy Clewell describes this traditional elegiac structure as a space or construct in which the author is able to 'confront the death, idealise the deceased, create a consoling substitute for the lost object, and move beyond the loss' (2009, 39). As David Kennedy points out, the problem with Freud's notion of melancholia – in contrast to his definition of 'mourning' – is that it is frequently 'identified with problems with relationships and self-esteem and *made to seem trivial*' (2007, 42; my emphasis). Kennedy goes on to note that, in spite of this, 'Many critics have noted modern elegists' unwillingness or refusal to give up their dead and, taking their lead from Freud, have argued for the predominantly melancholic nature of the modern elegy' (2007, 57).

This study proposes, following the work of critics such as Kennedy, Clewell and Uppal, that 'unsuccessful' mourning is conducive to creativity, or, in other words, that melancholia, as an unfinished process of grieving, keeps elegiac spaces open. Foer could be said to have 'unsuccessfully' mourned his past due to the fact that he doesn't own it. Indeed, rather than writing about something he has experienced firsthand, the author is writing about a sense of loss he has inherited from his family members –

namely his grandmother – in the form of gaps and silences. What also makes the elegies Foer's fiction enacts unique or exceptional is that, in a sense, the author is not really mourning for a specific person; according to *Everything is Illuminated*, his grandfather was saved from the Nazis, so the sense of loss is more complex than the death of a loved one. Foer is mourning instead for a group of people and grappling with the inherited silences that his grandmother was 'unable to talk about', but which haunted his family's dinner table (The Wheeler Centre, Melbourne 2011).

As a result of this condition of melancholia, Foer has been extraordinarily creative in trying to bring those dead back to life, again and again, as I will address shortly. Writing into elegiac spaces, Foer creates imaginative substitutions. At the same time, his use of magical-realist tropes and the metafictional elements of the author's work refuse consolation or resolution, by acknowledging, as Adams describes, that 'the idea of past events remaining available to the present knowledge is itself a fantasy' (2011, 34). For Foer, the only way to compensate for loss is by overcompensating and the author recovers a past that is and always was irretrievably lost to him – at least in any felt or immediate sense – by re-imagining or inventing it magically or hyperbolically. In a 2002 interview for *The Times*, Foer described the nature and extent of the absences he encountered during a trip he made to the Ukraine:

> There wasn't a grandfather, there wasn't a dog, there wasn't a woman I found who resembled the woman in the book – but I did go, and I just found – nothing. It's not like anything else I've ever experienced in my life. In a certain sense the book wasn't an act of creation so much as it was an act of replacement. I encountered a hole – and it was like the hole that I found was in myself, and one that I wanted to try to fill up. (quoted in Wagner 2002)

Foer had travelled to the Ukraine in order to research his family history and had initially intended to write a non-fictional account of his experiences (Collado-Rodriguez 2008, 56). However, faced with the unequivocal absences mentioned above, he instead confronted these silences by using magical-realist and metafictional techniques in his novel. Indeed, the magical-realist interruptions in *Everything is illuminated* – which include flights into fantasy, fragmented and disordered story and plot structures, and unreliable narrators – demonstrate the imaginative, fantastical nature of elegiac literature, a preoccupation Foer returns to in his second novel, *Extremely loud and incredibly close*.

As Uppal posits, 'the elegy is favoured not only for its capacity to remember but also for its capacity to create memories' (2009, 31). This act of creation or construction attests to the generative nature of melancholia and the ways in which elegy involves creativity – something made explicit in *Everything is illuminated*, when Foer's fictionalised grandfather realises the 'Gypsy girl', his lover, is making up stories:

> She told him of ship voyages she had taken to places he had never heard of, and stories he knew were all untrue, were bad not-truths, even, but he nodded and tried to convince himself to be convinced, tried to believe her, because he knew *the origin of a story is always an absence*, and he wanted her to live among presences. (2002, 230; my emphasis)

Accordingly, Foer himself creates fiction in the absence of first-, even second-, hand memories. His magical realism not only allows him to access this elegiac space, but also attests to the difficulty, perhaps the impossibility, of retrieving the past in such a personal and intimate way.

Indeed, elegy scholarship also suggests that elegy is a literature of desire. Invoking Rosemary Jackson's study of fantastic literature, Kennedy synthesises the poetics of elegy with fantasy, proposing that the 'imaginary, unfinishable conversations in uncanny elegiac spaces' and the 'eternally recurring, broken conversations[s]' enacted in the elegy 'function in a similar manner to what [Jackson] reads in fantasy as "a literature of desire, which seeks that which is experienced as absence or loss"' (quoted in Kennedy 2007, 61). Bringing the dead back to life through writing is always an act of imagination or fantasy. It is, as such, also an act of pure language, which might also attest to the metafictional elements of Foer's writing. By writing a narrative about constructing or manufacturing narratives and historical truths or artefacts, Foer tests the capacities of language and demonstrates what Kennedy describes as the way in which 'language distances us from reality' (2007, 44). The author's writing also enacts what Anne C Hegerfeldt describes, in her study of magical-realist literature, as 'drawing attention to its own constructedness' as a narrative. Indeed, magical-realist fiction, Hegerfeldt contends, 'self-consciously presents itself as "lies that tell the truth"' (2005, 7).

Magical realism and the desires of elegy

French literary critic and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva sees an essential link between melancholia and the human imagination: 'there is no imagination that is not, overtly or secretly, melancholy', she contends (1989, 6). Elegy, as I have argued, is inherently imaginative and creative in the way that it seeks to speak into an absence and engage with the lost or the dead. In *The year of magical thinking*, a memoir written following the death of her husband, Joan Didion describes her imaginative desire to transcend or refute reality. Didion explains that '"Bringing [her husband] back" had been through these months [her] hidden focus, a magic trick' (2011, 44). While *The year of magical thinking* is not a magical-realist text in that it does not rupture 'reality' with flights into the fantastic or marvellous, and, as Davis contends, although Didion's writing style is notably 'analytically distant and emotionally restrained' (2009, 5), the author's admission nonetheless demonstrates this sense of longing or desire – this impossible notion of a magic trick, or 'magical thinking' (Didion 2011, 33) – which is a common feature or quality of the elegy.

Having established that elegy is a literature of desire and that melancholia or unfinished mourning is conducive to creativity, I propose that there is a unique relationship between elegiac literature and magical realism. As outlined in this paper's introduction, through its refusal to adhere to a distinction between the marvellous and the real, magical realism demonstrates that all narrative is a construct and that literary realism is capable of – or at times culpable for – misrepresenting reality. Indeed, the mode is traditionally known as a literature of transgression, as critic Maria Takolander describes:

> With its base camp set up in the realist domain, [magical realism] slips, skips
> or charges into fantastic territory, sometimes without recognition of its
> trespasses, sometimes with mischievous glee and abandon, and sometimes
> with a confrontational and sadomasochistic attitude. (2007, 13–14)

Slipping and skipping into fantastic territory not only allows magical realism to confront and engage with the past – specifically in relation to dominant discourses and mainstream versions of history – but also enacts the desires of the elegy. In texts such as Foer's, I would argue that magical realism functions not so much as a subversion but as an extension of the imaginative or fantastic nature of elegy (and the author's melancholia), making the absent present and allowing the writer to engage with a lost or denied space.

As highlighted earlier, magical-realist fictions are peopled by the unhallowed: by ghosts and ghostlike presences. In *Beloved*, a former slave woman is haunted by the ghost of the child she murdered, while Joseph Skibell's Holocaust fiction, *A blessing on the moon* (1999), is narrated from the perspective of a murdered Jew. In a narrative that echoes Foer's *Everything is illuminated* in terms of its autobiographical elements and emphasis on familial histories and silences, Skibell literally raises the ghost of his murdered grandfather: 'I ran with dirt still in my mouth,' the protagonist recalls, having climbed out of the pit he was shot into. 'I had to spit it out as I ran' (1999, 4). Other examples might include the ghost of José Arcadio Buendía in García Márquez's *One hundred years of solitude*, as well as the ethereality of Isabel Allende's Rosa the Beautiful in *The house of the spirits* (1986) – a character that Stephen Hart contends is 'described in such terms as to make us wonder if she is really of this world' (2003, 118).

In Salman Rushdie's *The satanic verses*, Rosa Diamond offers a definition of spectrality, declaring: 'What's a ghost? Unfinished business, is what' (1988: 129). As Daniel Erickson suggests, this definition is 'particularly suggestive for the relationship between spectrality, metaphoricity, and history' (2009, 1). Indeed, such ghosts attest not only to the magical-realist text's own desires – which, as described earlier, are often political, demonstrating a postcolonial or feminist agenda – but also to the 'unfinished business' of unfinished mourning or melancholia.

Incredibly intimate: Foer's magical realism

Everything is illuminated and *Extremely loud and incredibly close* represent, respectively, the Holocaust, the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Dresden bombings of World War II. As highlighted in previous sections, in Foer's first novel, a young American – eponymously named 'Jonathan Safran Foer' – travels to the Ukraine, hoping to uncover the stories of his grandfather's Holocaust experience. The text is made up of letters between Jonathan and his Ukrainian translator, Alex, as well as chapters of the narrator-Jonathan's novel, in which the author imagines – intimately and often hyperbolically – what his eighteenth- to early-nineteenth-century ancestors might have experienced in the make-believe shtetl[1] Trachimbrod. Using similar meta-textual and magical-realist techniques, *Extremely loud and incredibly close* veers between chapters narrated by nine-year-old Oskar

Schell, whose father has perished in 9/11, and narratives and artefacts belonging to Oskar's grandparents, whose families were killed in the World War II Dresden firebombing.

In both texts, events of the past are frequently represented in ways that the stylistics of literary realism would reject, as Hegerfeldt argues, 'as impossible or as too implausible' (2005, 79). In *Everything is illuminated*, for example, the metafictional author's 'great-great-great-great-grandmother', Brod, is born out of a river, 'still mucas-glazed, still pink as the inside of a plum' (2002, 20; 13). In a subsequent scene, the women of the shtetl, who are not allowed inside the synagogue in which baby Brod is kept, view the child through an egg-sized hole in the wall: 'they had to piece together mental collages of her from each of the fragmented views … they learned to hate her unknowability, her untouchability, the collage of her' (20). Metaphorically, this echoes Foer's own sense of seeing or understanding events of the past; similarly, when, in subsequent chapters, Brod has a child of her own, Foer uses magical realism to literalise a metaphor about the inheritance of familial violence and trauma, and tragedy: 'After eighteen days, the baby – who had, with its ear pressed against Brod's bellybutton, heard everything – was born' (139).

Likewise, in *Extremely loud and incredibly close*, felt absences become textual realities and literalised metaphors. In chapters titled 'Why I'm not where you are', Thomas Schell uses letter to his unborn son (Oskar's father) to describe how, in his grief, he began to lose words and the ability to signify meaning:

> I couldn't finish the sentence, her name wouldn't come, I tried again, it wouldn't come, she was locked inside me, how strange, I thought, how frustrating, how pathetic, how sad … it happened again two days later, and then again the following day, she was the only thing I wanted to talk about, it kept happening… (2006, 16)

Foer's character goes on to describe substituting words: 'and' for 'ampersand', 'want' for desire' and so on (16). Such departures from the literary real are not necessarily impossible, but, as Hegerfeldt contends of magical-realist texts more generally, they are 'absurd enough to make the reader hesitate' (2005, 79).

Both narratives also demonstrate a preoccupation with the way the past is remembered and with acts of recording. In the first magical-realist chapter of *Everything is illuminated*, set in Trachimbrod, the village twins discover the contents of a sunken horse cart floating up from the bottom of the river. Foer lists these traces and relics in meticulous and extensive detail:

> … the curious flotsam rising to the surface: wandering snakes of white string, a crushed-velvet glove with outstretched fingers, barren spools, schmootzy pince-nez, rasp- and boysenberries, feces, frillwork, the shards of a shattered atomizer … a yellow pinwheel, a muddy hand mirror, the petals of some sunken forget-me-not, silt and cracked black pepper, a packet of seeds.
> (2002, 8–9)

Extremely loud and incredibly close is comparably explicit when it comes to ideas about memory and recordmaking. In another of Thomas Schell Sr's letters, the narrator tells his son:

> I have so much to tell you, the problem isn't that I'm running out of time, I'm
> running out of room, this book is filling up, there couldn't be enough pages, I
> looked around the apartment this morning for one last time and there was
> writing everywhere, filling the walls and mirrors, I'd rolled up the rugs so I
> could write on the floors, I'd written on the windows and around the bottles
> of wine we were given but never drank, I wear only short sleeves, even when
> it's cold, because my arms are books, too. (2006, 132)

Significantly, the text often resorts to visual images to help supplement the narrative itself, which seems to suggest that words are not enough. As S Todd Atchison contends, *Extremely loud and incredibly close* is preoccupied with creating artefacts for remembrance. Foer's use of meta-text – the inclusion or construction of his characters' letters, scrapbooks and writing notebooks – Atchison suggests, is 'an attempt to work through the limitations of language, thus allowing for a multiplicity of voices and interrelationships that account for different experiences' (2010, 362). Not only do these inclusions echo magical realism's emphasis or insistence on a multiplicity of experience, they also illustrate the way that recollections of the past are non-linear and often fragmented.

Conclusion

Magical realism and elegy, as this paper has discussed, are both literatures of desire that corrupt reality in order to facilitate 'unfinished conversations in uncanny elegiac spaces' (Kennedy 2007, 61). In the elegiac prose of novels such as Foer's, magical-realist techniques extend the imaginative, fantastical work of elegy, which often bring the dead back to life in order for these conversations or encounters to take place.

Melancholia, or unfinished mourning, as this paper has demonstrated, is conducive to creativity. For Foer, the absence of memory, or of knowing, facilitates creation and construction. Transporting himself into this simulated space of representation, the author is able to write into this lost or denied space and his characters and stories are often unreal and impossibly intimate. At the same time, the novels' autobiographical and metafictional elements demonstrate the constructedness of such interventions; language cannot exist outside of its own context and so, while these narratives enable understanding and access to the past, they do not provide consolation.

Endnote

1. shtetl: 'a small Jewish town or village in eastern Europe' (Oxford Dictionary Online)

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