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Absence is often associated with loss and erasure, not usually with creation. However, it is precisely a meticulous, methodical process of creating gaps in Bruno Schulz's *The Street of Crocodiles* (1934) that allows Jonathan Safran Foer to *exhume* *Tree of Codes* (2010) from the body of Schulz's novel. Though the term "exhume" may seem unusual, it is crucial in understanding Foer's method; a point I will explain shortly.

Before delving into Foer's experimental fiction, it is prudent to first discuss Schulz, particularly his literary contributions and some of the reasons why Foer chose this relatively obscure author to carve *Tree of Codes* from. Schulz was born in 1892 in Drohobycz, a small town in the Austro-Hungarian province of Galicia, now part of Ukraine. As a Jew during the Nazi occupation of his hometown, Schulz was considered a non-person. Yet, a Gestapo officer began to favor him when he realized Schulz was a talented painter, having Schulz paint a mural for his child's nursery. Unfortunately, the Gestapo officer that protected Schulz killed the favored Jew of a fellow Gestapo officer and Schulz was consequently murdered as the result of a revenge killing.

Though Schulz did attempt to safeguard his paintings, texts, and other artistic endeavors by giving them to various gentile friends, much of his oeuvre remains hidden from the public eye. It is unknown if these works have been destroyed or if they are in private

collections. Perhaps the most notable loss is his masterpiece novel *The Messiah*; it allegedly has been preserved, but there are no complete or partial copies currently circulating publicly.

Fortunately, Schulz's high modernist novel *The Street of Crocodiles* survived the fascist purges of Jewish culture. Originally titled *Sklepy cynamonowe* or *Cinnamon Shops* in reference to the layout of Schulz's hometown, the title was changed in American publications to reflect a particular chapter in the book. This is quite significant as Foer relies on a translation from the original Polish by Celina Wieniewska, establishing a degree of separation from the original work. Even the title *Tree of Codes* illustrates this debt to the translation as *The Street of Crocodiles* is used to derive the title *Tree of Codes*. *The Street of Crocodiles* → *Tree of Codes*.

This leads us to analyze Foer's technique. Perhaps it is best described as a nuanced variation on William Burrough's cut-up technique, removing random outcomes in crafting an original book. Essentially, Foer excises pieces of Schulz's book to create an entirely new fiction without writing a single word or changing syntax. The gaps that are created have several ontological, semiotic, and visual layers. I argue that Foer did indeed write *Tree of Codes* through a painstaking process that makes his work a unique type of metafiction.

The publisher for *Tree of Codes* is the London based Visual Editions. Their mission statement, found on the back cover of *Tree of Codes* states:

We think that books should be as visually interesting as the stories they tell; with the visual feeling feeding into and adding to the story telling as much as the words on the page. We call it visual writing. And our strap line is 'Great looking stories.'

In this sense, Foer has remediated a print novel into a unique piece of literary, physical art imbued with a multitude of layers of signification. The act of reading *Tree of Codes* becomes an engagement with literature and his creative process as one must peel the pages from one another to adequately read his work. On one level, the reader of *Tree of Codes* enters a literary game with Foer, knowing that *Tree of Codes* is a metafictional repurposing of *The Street of Crocodiles*. Foer claims he has “exhumed” his work—an appropriate description of his process stating:

At times I felt that 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. I have never read another book so intensely or so many times. I’ve never memorized so many phrases, or, as the act of erasure progressed, forgotten so many phrases. This is in no way a book like *The Street of Crocodiles*. It is a small response to that great book. It 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.¹

Foer’s new textual object challenges the notions of author, reader, and text through a paradoxical process of systematic erasure. It is relevant to note that Foer claims his own work is not “exactly a work of fiction;” this imprecision or difficulty in categorization is a hallmark of *Tree of Codes*. The narrative in *Tree of Codes* is by nature fictitious, yet in “transcribing a dream that *The Street of Crocodiles* might or had,” Foer shifts the focus of his book from narrative to the process and results of crafting of an exogenous metafiction.

¹ Foer 138

While Foer took it upon himself to create *Tree of Codes* in this fashion, he also imagined Schulz undertaking a similar endeavor stating:

Often, while working on this book, I had a strong sensation that *The Street of Crocodiles* must have, itself, been the product of a similar act of exhumation. I've always loved Schulz's writing, but it wasn't until I engaged with it in this particular way that I fully appreciate how radically odd it is. The sentences feel too unlikely to have been created on purpose. The language is too heightened, the images too magical and precarious, the yearning too dire, the sense of loss too palpable—everything is too simultaneously comic and tragic. I could not help but feel that Schulz's hand must've been forced, that there must have existed some yet larger book from which *The Street of Crocodiles* was taken.²

The ontological and epistemological implications of a larger book calls to mind John Barth's essay "The Literature of Exhaustion". It evokes the image of a text that holds all potential works within its binds, ever growing, yet creates a situation in which nothing singularly original can be created.

Interestingly, *The Street of Crocodiles* mentions a nonexistent text called *Treatise on Tailors' Dummies* or, more significantly, *The Second Book of Genesis*. While the religious implications are worth discussing, the prophetic literary aspect is quite intriguing. It is as if Schulz understood that his works, and by extension other literature may undergo a process of repurposing. More than just sharing an extremely intimate intertextual relationship with each

² Ibid 139

other, *Tree of Codes* is a metafictional object obsessed with its own creative process. *The Second Book of Genesis* asserts:

All attempts at organizing matter are transient and temporary, easy to reverse and to dissolve. *There is no evil in reducing life to other and newer forms.*

Homicide is not a sin. It is sometimes a necessary violence on resistant and ossified forms of existence which have ceased to be amusing. In the interests of an important and fascinating experiment, it can even become meritorious.

Here is the starting point of a new apologia for sadism (emphasis mine).³

That excerpt highlights the nature of *Tree of Codes*' relationship with its literary predecessor. However, Foer's intervention is not so much sadistic as it more of a palpable demonstration of a deeply felt cultural literary loss. Foer perhaps sees in Schulz a literary father figure—both are Jewish writers linked by cultural memory and avant-garde, experimental fiction.

I have mentioned that *Tree of Codes* is obsessed with its own process of creation. Roland Barthes' essay, "From Work to Text", is useful in describing how I mean *Tree of Codes* calls into question its own ontological status as a book.⁴ Barthes provides "hints" as to what he considers a "Work" and what he considers a "Text". These are hints as Barthes leaves some flexibility and grey areas in establishing their differences—there are no hard and fast rules to serve as an unwavering guideline. "From Work to Text" illustrates the manner in which Schulz's fiction can be considered a "Work", though for *Tree of Codes* it is a little more complex. *Tree of Codes* begins as a "Work", stemming from *Street of Crocodiles*, however, during its process of creation it is a "Text". Only during its process of creation can

³ Schulz 31

⁴ Originally appearing in *Revue d'esthétique* in 1971.

Tree of Codes be considered a “Text” in Barthes theory as the book ends up being a “Work”.

It all sounds rather confusing, but it is not as tricky as it seems.

For the sake of clarity, it is necessary to establish what constitutes a “Work” and how does it differ from a “Text”. Barthes writes:

The text must not be understood as a computable object, It would be futile to attempt a material separation of works from texts. In particular, we must not permit ourselves to say: the work is classical, the text is avant-garde...The difference is as follows: the work is a fragment of substance, it occupies a portion of the spaces of books (for example a library). The Text is a methodological field...*the text is experienced only in an activity, in a production*. It follows that the Text cannot stop (for example, at a library shelf); its constitutive moment is *traversal* (notably, it can traverse the work, several works).⁵

A computable object or a “Work” is a single, discreet object with established borders, and can be quantifiable within a reasonable degree of certainty. The “Work” carries ideological baggage as it must conform to convention to a greater or lesser extent to be classified as such. The computable object is a distinct entity unto itself, yet in that sense it is situated in a particular place and time, often confined to a particular tradition, and attributed to a single author. Under these parameters, *The Street of Crocodiles* varies little from 18th century works. Foer’s methodology temporarily remediates *The Street of Crocodiles* into a “Text”. The “Text” has no borders, thus cannot stop; therefore *Tree of Codes* is not a pure “Text”, but the recording of an activity that takes on the dimensions of a “Text”. Hence, in this instance,

⁵ Barthes 57-58

the “Text” is the process Foer used to eventually settle into a metafictional version of a “Work”. The “Work” has qualities attributed to humans such as expressiveness, consciousness. Yet, the “Text” sheds this human-like tendency in favor of complete immersion in methodology.

Conceptually, a “Text” is rather grandeur. Barthes demonstrates this by relating his theory to the Biblical story of the man possessed by demons found in Mark 5:9, quoting, “My name is legion, for we are many.”⁶ *Tree of Codes* as a possibility relishes its capacity for plurality, breaking from the singularity of traditional novels. Allowing, even counting on, alternative reading strategies, experimental writing profits from various points of entry and reading paths. Often it is ludic in nature, but this is part of the literary game: behind the smoke and mirrors lie serious implications for the status and nature of contemporary literature. As *Tree of Codes* was germinating, it was legion, a statistical possibility out of innumerable books carved from Schulz’s book.

However, the merit of each of these attempts cannot be presumed equal. *Tree of Codes* is the assumed best possible product given Foer’s capabilities as author through deletion. And yet it would be remiss to not consider *Tree of Codes* as a work that could have been something else entirely, sprawling in other directions, creating almost an interminable amount of combinations and permutations for *The Street of Crocodile’s* continuation.

Therefore, Foer’s process creates a brand of literature that is exceptionally difficult to classify. *Tree of Codes* relies on a “Work”, becomes a “Text”, and, conceptually, it may remain so. Yet, by design it must become a “Work” in its final stage. Foer’s book is a treatise on the writing out of writing, a reinvention of the role of the author—an inversion of the typical method for creation. Foer is a subversive type of creator—his tools are used for excision rather than molding. Barthes states:

⁶ Ibid 60

The author is reputed to be the father and owner of his work; literary science thus teaches us to *respect* the manuscript and the author's declared intentions, and society postulates a legality of the author's relation to his work... The Text, on the other hand, is read without the Father's inscription. The metaphor of the Text is here again detached from the metaphor of the work; the latter refers to the image of an *organism* which grows by vital expansion, by "development"...⁷

Foer's title suggests this organic quality, an organism laden with semiotic codes, a conflicting construct that will be revisited shortly. *Tree of Codes* has recorded its own "vital expansion" or "development", making Barthes' theory especially relevant in analyzing this text, and what it aims to achieve. Though *Tree of Codes* inevitably returns to being a "Work" upon completion, it still retains traces of Barthes' view on "Texts". Though it is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth mentioning that *Tree of Codes* provides excellent fodder for considering Barthes' famous "Death of the Author" postulation; in this instance, it may not be so hyperbolic as it initially seems. It would be an arduous assignment to argue how much of Foer can be found in the end product of *Tree of Codes* and how much of Schulz remains as a result.

Gaps, traces, fragments, substances...etc. may make *Tree of Codes* seem like an inconsistent, borderline incoherent reading experience. However, apart from the occasional clunky sentence, it functions successfully as a narrative. Foer did not sacrifice story completely for the novelty of creating his textual object. In defense of Foer's authorship of

⁷ Ibid 61

Tree of Codes without penning a single word, altering grammar, or changing punctuation, one must further consider the ramifications his intervention leads to.

In *Of Grammatology*, Jacques Derrida theorizes that writing is no longer a tool to express language.⁸ Rather, language can only be expressed through signification. Foer maintains full artistic and creative credit as author if we are to go on the premise that “writing thus comprehends language” through the “signifier of the signifier.”⁹ *Tree of Codes* serves as a signifier to *The Street of Crocodiles*, exemplary of a new and alternate form of writing. *Tree of Codes* comprehends *The Street of Crocodiles* without actually being *The Street of Crocodiles*. *Tree of Codes* signifies its primary source, creating a recursive dynamic. One cannot read *Tree of Codes* without being constantly reminded of its origins. Derrida affirms: “The good writing has therefore always been *comprehended*...The idea of the book, which always refers to a natural totality, is profoundly alien to the sense of writing.”¹⁰

Debatably more significant than the words that are left on the page of *Tree of Codes* are the gaps that overwhelm the page. Amongst other aspects, these gaps visually demonstrate the broken nature of Holocaust literature. While *The Street of Crocodiles* was written before the Shoah, it is concerned with preserving community and tradition—particularly Jewish. *The Street of Crocodiles* is a book written on the precipice of disaster, fully aware that dark times are likely ahead. On a bit of a side note, *The Street of Crocodiles* does remain overall hopeful, returning to cycles of death, rebirth, and change. If we are to go on the premise that a “Work” has a consciousness, then *The Street of Crocodiles* is aware of its precarious situation, believing that the newer forms of literature will be formed through a violent upheaval of traditional literary techniques.

Foer’s gaps more than just represent the loss of Jewish culture—it is a tangible, sensorial recreation of irretrievable content. This visual and tactile experience allows Foer’s

⁸ Originally titled *De la Grammatologie* written in 1967.

⁹ Derrida 6

¹⁰ Ibid 18

book to be more than a mere literary experiment or exercise. While there are ludic qualities in *Tree of Codes* as Foer invites to play a literary game of filling in the gaps ourselves; the book is a palpable reminder of the irrevocable consequences of disaster and destruction. Foer describes his own technique, writing:

For years I had wanted to create a die-cut book by erasure, a book whose meaning was exhumed from another book. I had thought of trying the technique with the dictionary, the encyclopedia, the phone book, various works of fiction and non-fiction, and with my own novels. But any of those of options would have merely spoken to the process. The book would have been an exercise. I was in search of a text whose erasure would somehow be a continuation of its creation.¹¹

Foer's technique is subversive to the typical process of writing a novel as most novelists add words to a blank page instead of adding blanks on a page full of words. Tragically, the extent of what has been lost to history is unquantifiable; the value or merit of these missing works are left only as a debatable hypothesis. The seemingly contradictory technique of continuation through creation simultaneously allows *Tree of Codes* to be a text of destruction and creation. There are instances in Foer's work where the page itself is hardly present, consumed by the empty space—representing the eternal amnesia of a damaged cultural memory. N. Katherine Hayles states in *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis* (2012):

¹¹ Foer 138

...capturing the past is metaphorically rendered as a man digging a hole so deep that his response to questions from the surface come slower and slower, thus opening a gap between the present of his interlocutors and his answers, as if he were fading into the past. Finally he digs so deep that no one can hear him at all, an analogy to a past that slips into oblivion.¹²

The manner in which *The Street of Crocodiles* is used makes it a metonymy for the overall losses incurred from the Shoah. The “codes” of *Tree of Codes* can never be completely cracked, as there are no answers as to why such an event occurred. The title of Foer’s book presents a bipolar implication. “Tree” has an organic connection, a network of visceral blood links of sorts. “Codes” relates semiotic difference. Connecting these disparate concepts further establishes not only the contradictory, paradoxical qualities of *Tree of Codes*, but also helps reaffirm that Foer is playing a literary game of the implausible.

Tree of Codes can be classified as forming part of post-Holocaust literature, especially if one analyzes the book in the context of other post-Holocaust writings. Though quite hyperbolic, Theodore Adorno states in a reading of Beckett’s *Endgame*, aptly titled “Trying to Understand Endgame”, that “...philosophy, or spirit itself, proclaims its bankruptcy as the dreamlike dross of the experimental world, and the poetic process shows itself as worn out.”¹³ Simply, Adorno is expressing that after The Disaster or Shoah, poetry is no longer a viable or possible means of literary expression.

The inability to adequately articulate the events surrounding the Disaster may be expressed through fragmentation. Rather than a muted voice, it is a fractured impression; one cannot properly communicate what has taken place. Those chronicling cannot recreate the moment and all too often those that were in the closest proximity are either completely

¹² Hayles 112

¹³ Adorno 121

eliminated or too traumatized. Literature finds avenues to express the speechless through complex use of structure. Experimental fictions have made use of “negative space” on the page, regardless if the negative space is represented as a blank or a blacked out section, the purpose remains the same—conventional literature inadequately expresses the unspeakable. However, Foer’s book brings negative space to the forefront. The negative space in *Tree of Codes* overwhelms the words on the page, possibly to the point of distraction. Yet, the writing in *Tree of Codes* prevents this strange textual object from entering an art gallery—the typography illustrates the unspeakable whilst simultaneously articulating an unconventional narrative.

Maurice Blanchot in *The Writing of The Disaster* states: “Let us share eternity in order to make it transitory.”¹⁴ At first, this is a rather unusual and apparently, contradictory sentiment. Eternity implies a sense of permanence—an indelible lasting quality. However, shared experiences are fleeting. Therefore, Blanchot’s sense of history and the eternal is that which can be communicated in shared revelations or experiences. In sharing his impression of the eternal nature of past historical events, those that cannot be altered, or experienced first-hand by consequent generations, Blanchot creates a form of writing that reflects the inarticulateness of The Disaster. *Tree of Codes* also attempts to get as near to the tragedy as possible, yet the gaps persistently push back the reader, creating an impassible barricade to that moment. However, both Foer and Blanchot attempt to defy chronological history or linear time through their artistic endeavors.

The sense of eternity is predicated on transitory states. *The Writing of Disaster* and *Tree of Codes* are shattered mirrors reflecting pieces of a moment through left impressions. These works simultaneously draw the reader closer to the tragedy whilst reinforcing the impossibility of absolute recreation through a literary vehicle.

¹⁴ Blanchot 146; Originally titled *L’Ecriture du Désastre* published in 1980.

Blanchot writes: “The mortal leap of the writer without which he would not write is necessarily an illusion to the extent that, in order really to be accomplished, it must not take place.”¹⁵ Illusion denotes an artificial construct, therefore the “mortal leap of the writer” requires a suspension of disbelief for both the writer and their audience. Yet, this illusion must be subverted for literature to act as a type of historical record. While it is incapable of perfect recreation, successful literature can create epistemological shifts in the reader, changing their perception of certain events. The remediation of Schulz’s book decenters the “authorial voice” in both *The Street of Crocodiles* and *Tree of Codes*. Arguably, Foer does not write a “complete book” in a conventional sense—rather he creates a fragmented web of relatively connected sentences and quasi-interrelated ideas.

And yet, Foer executes *Tree of Codes* so well that the contents of the gaps remain a mystery. The reader must either hazard a guess to the missing content or defeat the purpose of *Tree of Codes* and cross-reference it with Schulz’s book. Knowing what fills these gaps defeats the purpose of recreating the gaps of information; the fissures in the cultural links after The Disaster would be plastered over. It is a pleasant thought, but such a thing is an impossibility.

Blanchot theorizes: “The simplest words convey the inexchangeable; they switch back and forth with each other all around it; it appears not. Life so precarious: never the presence of life, but our eternal prayer to the other that he might live while we die.”¹⁶ Foer’s decision to not substitute or rearrange Schulz’s words elevates Schulz’s work to being a type of sacred object. Therefore, it can be said that Foer is paying homage to Schulz’s book, despite altering its content. In altering *The Street of Crocodiles*, Foer changes the original manuscript’s meaning and signification. The absence of Foer’s own authorial voice allows for the sprawling capacity *Tree of Codes* has as experimental fiction. Repurposing Schulz’s

¹⁵ Ibid 64

¹⁶ Ibid 86

manuscript transcends superficial novelty: it is a continuation of high modernist novels into the realm of experimental print fiction.

While Foer's intervention evokes similarities with electronic fictions, *Tree of Codes* is not easily—impossible even—to effectively remediate into an electronic format. The fragile nature of a page riddled with holes does not translate easily into non-print formats; the reader can feel the damage on the page. *Tree of Codes* as an artistic textual object has more impact as the product of a palpable void.

A product of remediation is more than just an alternative representation of the source material. Though most remediation takes place across different mediums, *Tree of Codes* is unique in that it remains a book. Rather than fostering continuity between the source material whilst converting it to a different platform, Foer brazenly makes Schulz's novel something else entirely. As classifying these new forms is rather difficult—especially as these tend to move faster than the ascribed nomenclature or category—it is convenient to simply call *Tree of Codes* a textual object. Essentially, we have in *Tree of Codes* this peculiar brand of metafiction that even challenges the relatively new concept of remediation. Yet, this is may be more accurately called a subtype of remediation as *Tree of Codes* not only pushes the boundaries of the print medium, it also refuses to present itself in a different format. This is not a broad type of remediation; in fact it is so nuanced that it can only be replicated with other source texts from traditional print fiction to experimental fiction. Basically, *The Street of Crocodiles* could be remediated into film; *Tree of Codes* cannot be adequately expressed as such. Another example would be if someone were to use any other print novel and imitate Foer's technique in the attempt of achieving a similar end.

Foer's work is a deviation from the standard, an aberration from the norm. In recording an activity, *Tree of Codes* becomes the remediation of the standard novel. It has no borders, incapable of stopping until it settles in the role of a metafictional "Work." Foer's

writing of the disaster is an attempt to reconnect to the moment of writing, linking global disaster with individual trauma. Foer has a preoccupation with trauma literature, as evidenced by his previous works *Everything is Illuminated* (2002) and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005). However, *Tree of Codes* is a stylistic and structural departure. It is far from coincidental that his source material for his textual object resides on the brink of the unspeakable.

Oskar's grandfather in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* is a mute for the majority of the novel whilst *Everything is Illuminated* is a fictionalized autobiographical account, of which Foer includes himself as a character. *Tree of Codes* is an expression of a muted voice, the continuation of a severed body of work. Arguably more ambitious in scope, *Tree of Codes* expresses the silencing of a community as it attempts to carry on the former traditions. As a finished composition or product, *Tree of Codes* is akin to a broken vase that has been glued together with missing pieces: It resembles its former shape and structure, but it is entirely something *else*, no longer serving its primary or intended initial function.

Foer's celebrity has created an interest in the once relatively unheard of Schulz. While Schulz has not breached the mainstream, he is no longer relegated to the scrutiny of specialists. In this aspect, *Tree of Codes* has become part of Schulz's literary legacy. The renewed interest in *The Street of Crocodiles* is developing into a means of partially filling in some of the gaps. *Tree of Codes* is evidently a novel dependent upon *The Street of Crocodiles*, yet *The Street of Crocodiles* owes a burgeoning readership to its continuation. *Tree of Codes* is no longer the gravestone rubbing, but an exemplary form of successfully repurposed literature.

The conceptual framework of *Tree of Codes* surpasses Foer's previous works. His other novels, and his more or less non-fiction work *Eating Animals* (2009) are innovative and worthy of discussion in their own right, yet *Tree of Codes* demands a reassessment of what

the novel can be. *Tree of Codes* has the conventions of narrative and plot, yet it cannot escape the haunting presence of history. As a writing of writing, it can be read independently from *The Street of Crocodiles*, yet the necessity of reading the source material is a fundamental requirement in understanding both texts. *The Street of Crocodiles* has experienced a cultural shift as it is now being discovered through the shade cast by *Tree of Codes*.

Meaning is a retrospective. As prophetic as *The Street of Crocodiles* is, it lacked a profound cultural impact until Foer's intervention. *Tree of Codes* is an unlikely coherent, cohesive fragmentation portraying the precarious status of literature. The removal of a single generation constitutes a break in the literary chain. Foer's previous works reinforce the importance of inheritance, familial and literary. Foer potentially describes his creative process in *Tree of Codes* writing: "It was a dialogue swollen with darkness."¹⁷ He goes on to state that *Tree of Codes* is a "...a geometry of emptiness", referring to it being a meticulously crafted object with textual precision.¹⁸ The book works in tandem with absence and presence, creation and negation, returning to Schulz's themes of death and rebirth.

Foer writes: "We find ourselves part of the tree of codes."¹⁹ The eponymous tree of codes is partly formed by the manner in which the reader chooses to fill in the gaps, if the reader chooses to do so at all. The line between reader and author can never be completely erased, though this book brings about a closer relationship. The gaps themselves are semiotic codes, arguably existing as more complex referents than the words. It may be that the gaps are not between the words, but the words are the culmination of just one possibility in experiencing the moment.

¹⁷ Foer 29

¹⁸ Ibid 29

¹⁹ Ibid 92

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