The Amnesiac Consciousness of the Contemporary Holocaust Novel: Lily Brett's *Too Many Men* and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated*

Introduction: Cultural Memory and Cultural Identity

How does one begin to memorialise an event of which there is little or no direct memory? Contemporary cultural memory of the Holocaust is almost monolithic in scope, constructed out of myriad fragments of image, narrative and artefact, and deeply ingrained into the Western cultural consciousness. And yet the very term 'cultural memory' may well be a misnomer: it evokes a deliberate act of collective memory that lays claim to an understanding of the past that is problematic to say the least, given the extreme complexity and oft-cited unknowability of the Holocaust as both an event and an experience. Furthermore, memory defines itself through its relationship to forgetfulness, a dialectic which is problematised by the lack of available knowledge and understanding surrounding the Holocaust experience. When we speak of cultural memory of the Holocaust, it is true that this discourse is framed by a need to prevent forgetting in the future; however, this drive for cultural memorialisation proceeds not from an act of forgetting, but from the complete absence of memory. Given these complicating factors, this paper proceeds from the position that, with regard to the Holocaust, cultural amnesia may provide a more appropriate framework for memorialisation than the oft-cited, potentially oxymoronic 'cultural memory of the Holocaust.'

The identity ('self-image') of a specific culture is characterised by the way in which it views its own history, filtered through a "collective image of the past" (Asmann and Czaplicka 127). Access to this history (and by extension the image) is regulated via the practice of cultural memory: "a collective concept for all knowledge that directs behaviour and experience in the interactive framework of a society and one that obtains through generations in repeated societal practice and initiation" (126). Significantly, cultural memory is not an automatic reflex of the collective body of knowledge that constitutes a culture; rather it is in itself a construct, designed to incorporate the events of history into a frame of reference appropriate to the culture itself. In this sense it is not strictly a form of memory at all, but another series of cultural practices akin to narrative. As Susan Sontag notes, "what is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating: that *this* is important, and this is the story about how it happened […]. Ideologies create substantiating archives of images, representative images, which encapsulate common ideas of significance and trigger predictable thoughts, feelings" (76-77). Cultural memory thus works in a similar manner to the literary concept of genre, insofar as it ultimately works to provide a frame of reference through which cultural meaning can be attributed to an object, be it text or event. It can be defined precisely in its mediatory relation between culture and history, although achieving such a definition is by no means a simple feat. Memory is nothing if not intangible, a fact that holds true as much for the individual as it does on a wider cultural level; so arriving at a definite version of something labelled 'cultural memory' is in itself a challenging prospect. In order to understand cultural memory, and by further implication, its opposite, cultural amnesia, it is necessary to begin by identifying the distinction between memory and history, two concepts that appear to go hand in hand with each other, but which are in fact entirely distinct entities. However, as Paul Ricoeur notes, it is sometimes very difficult to identify the boundary between the two: "the frontier is not so easy to trace as it might seem between individual memory and that past before any memory which is the historical past" (3:114). Ricoeur thus identifies the border between history and memory as primarily a temporal one; for Pierre Nora, memory and history are separated by the subjective nature of the former and the objective nature of the latter:

> Memory is life, always embodied in societies and as such in permanent evolution, subject to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of the distortions to which it is subject, vulnerable in various ways to appropriation and manipulation, and capable of lying dormant for long periods only to be suddenly reawakened. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction,

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> always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer […]. Memory, being a phenomenon of emotion and magic, accommodates only those facts that suit it. It thrives on vague, telescoping reminiscences, on hazy general impressions or specific symbolic details. It is vulnerable to transferences, screen memories, censorings, and projections of all kinds. History, being an intellectual, nonreligious activity, calls for analysis and critical discourse. (3)

What can we learn from this about the nature of memory? First, that it is distinct from history precisely because it is, as Nora puts it, "life": memory is a constantly evolving, living thing, which places it in counterpoint to history, history that is concerned entirely with "what is no longer," the past. Memory is, in this sense, "a phenomenon of the present" (3), which seeks to interpret the past in order to make it intelligible for the present. Second, as an interpretive act, memory is therefore not infallible: it is, as Nora comments, subject to multiple renegotiations in the forms listed above. In addition to this, there is also a sense in which history is seen as objective because historical fact is the same for all concerned, whereas "Memory wells up from groups that it welds together" (3). Memory in this sense can thus be viewed as the subjective interpretation of the past (history), as it appears to a particular group in the present moment. The relation of memory to the group as formulated by Nora is inherently symbiotic: the group is bound and defined by a common view of the past (as mentioned in the introductory definition of culture); the group thus produces a collective version of the past to act as the 'official' memory. Memory becomes the filter through which historical record is made pertinent, and accessible, present. This type of collectivised memory, however, depends for its success in constructing a group identity upon an intrinsic act of forgetting, thus locating the amnesiac consciousness at the core of an act of memorialisation.

Remembering and Forgetting

As Nora comments above, all memory is "subject to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting." Memory and forgetfulness are often posed within the cultural imaginary as a pair of binary opposites; however, this is a simplistic view of the processes of memorialisation. A more appropriate term can be borrowed from Gillian Rose: instead of constructing remembering and forgetting as a binary, we should envisage them as a "non-contrary double" (109), existing not in precise opposition but in a dialectical relationship, each dependent upon the other. In the same way that mourning the death of another might act inversely as an affirmation of life, so too an act of forgetting brings us to the edge of memory, reminding us of what we need to remember. Sontag may be right when noting that constructing a collective memory involves selecting the memories that are important enough to be remembered, but the inverse is also true. In deciding what to remember, we automatically decide what to forget. As Stier comments, any act of memorialisation is simultaneously caught up with forgetting: "For memory to matter, it must ultimately deal with forgetting. Forgetting raises its ugly head in every memorial situation, as its double, its ghost brother" (191). In this way, the prospect of forgetting can be useful: it constantly shadows memory as a 'ghost' that warns us of the dangers of not-remembering. More controversially, Stier also suggests that forgetting is a useful tool in the memorialisation of the Holocaust, in so far as it enables us to forget each failure of commemoration, and begin again:

> in constructing memorial representations of the past, we always return to the origin because we *cannot* capture beginning in memory. Every attempted representation comes back to this point, if for no other reason than that every attempt is inadequate, each one falls short of the monumental task in hand. We nonetheless keep trying. Perhaps we can do this because of our infinite capacity for forgetting. (191)

Every attempt at memorialisation is ultimately inadequate due to the inaccessibility of the Holocaust experience for cultural memory. The "origin" of which Stier speaks is the event itself, completely unavailable from the perspective of the contemporary cultural imagination. Here we are not dealing with forgetfulness as such, for this knowledge has never been available and therefore can never be forgotten. Rather, it is within this formulation that we encounter cultural amnesia; as a sense of memory that is missing but not lost, and with it a corresponding rupture within cultural identity. To further cite Stier, "sites of memory emerge at points of rupture in order to counteract forgetfulness" (9). Here I would substitute

'forgetfulness' for 'amnesia.' Amnesia proceeds from a neurological trauma in the same manner that the very inaccessibility of Holocaust memory is conditioned by a traumatic rupture in cultural identity. The desire for memory to counteract amnesia presents itself within the contemporary cultural imagination in the form of narrative, or more specifically as a "quest for narrative, for the ability to tell a story and thereby alleviate a burden" (Stier 2). As a response to the absence of memory, contemporary narratives of the Holocaust enter into an engagement with this dialectic of memory and forgetfulness, reproducing the amnesiac qualities of cultural memory of the Holocaust and calling to mind a second, less common usage of the word 'amnesia': the act of substituting words incorrectly. The attempt to narrate the Holocaust into cultural memory can be read as an act of substituting words for experience, thereby constructing a culturally-specific version of memory in order to mediate the fragmentation and loss inherent within cultural amnesia. The texts that I shall examine in this paper are all engaged in this act of substituting words, both implicitly in the terms already discussed and explicitly as a means of focusing on the quest for knowledge that characterises contemporary Holocaust narrative.

The Amnesiac Consciousness: Characters, Quests and Fragments

Both of the texts that I shall be analysing in order to uncover the amnesiac consciousness that, I contend, permeates the contemporary narrative response to the Holocaust, can be clearly defined as quest narratives. Thus they become immensely useful to us in externalising the quest for memory that Stier identifies as crucial to contemporary constructions of cultural memory surrounding the Holocaust. Each of these texts, Lily Brett's *Too Many Men* (1999) and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002), also serves to complicate the relationship between language and experience, or between the linguistic signifier and the corresponding (and illusory) signified of lived Holocaust experience in a manner that reveals cultural amnesia at the core of our relationship with the events of the Holocaust.

Amnesia and Anxiety: "Too Many Men"

Too Many Men tells the story of Ruth Rothwax, a child of Holocaust survivors, who travels to Poland with her father to visit the sites of his past. Ruth is searching for a deeper understanding of her parents' experiences, which have previously only been available to her "always in fragments. [Their past] was never whole. It always had to be pieced together. And the missing parts had to be imagined." As the only child of survivors, Ruth's own past is full of "so many gaps and vacancies;" her own cultural memory of the Holocaust is "punctured and perforated" by the fact of her parents' suffering, left with "large hollows and vacancies" (143). Thus Ruth understands her parents' experiences not from the position of memory, but precisely from within the uncertainty and dislocation of amnesia. As a second-generation survivor, Ruth's relationship to her parents' experiences is framed by what Marianne Hirsch has termed "postmemory." This is a phenomenon which "most specifically describes the relationship of children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma to the experiences of their parents, experiences that they 'remember' only as the narratives and images with which they grew up; however, they are so powerful, so monumental, as to constitute memories in their own right." Postmemory locates itself within the unknowable, has "its basis in displacement…vicariousness and belatedness" (9). It is thus akin to cultural amnesia insofar as it deals with memory that is largely available only through vicarious appropriation of another's experience. It offers a framework for the belated traumatic memory experienced by the children and grandchildren of survivors; a memory that manifests itself as they struggle to come to terms, as Ruth does, not only with their own identities but also with their parents' access to a knowledge and experience that they can themselves never fully comprehend, despite the fact that it has coloured and characterised their entire existence. More than this, Hirsch argues, postmemory

> need not be restricted to the family, or even to a group that shares an ethnic or national identity marking: through particular forms of identification, adoption and projection, it can be more broadly available… Thus, although familial inheritance offers the clearest model for it, postmemory need not be *strictly* an identity position. Instead, I prefer to see it as an intersubjective transgenerational space of remembrance, linked specifically to cultural or collective trauma. (9-10)

Thus, in the same manner that the amnesia of the individual can be read as a microcosmic representation of the cultural experience of memory lost, so postmemory acts on both a micro- and macrocosmic level to offer a framework for coming to terms with a knowledge that we have never had, and a memory that although present has never been remembered. It is just such an intersection between personal and cultural amnesia that we encounter in *Too Many Men*.

The narrative of *Too Many Men* is framed by the amnesiac consciousness: in the opening sentences of the novel, the narrator informs us of Ruth's unconscious urge to be violent towards Germans:

> the last time Ruth Rothwax had been with a group of Germans, she had wanted to poke their eyes out. The feeling had sprung out of her so suddenly and so unexpectedly that it had almost bowled her over. Where had this feeling come from? It had been a fully developed, ferocious wish–not some half-baked, halfhearted aggressive inclination. One minute she was deep in her own thoughts, the next minute she wanted to gouge an old woman's eyeballs out. (1)

Ruth appears to be motivated in this violent impulse by instinct alone: this is no response to a forgotten desire for revenge that resurfaces upon encountering a group of German tourists. Rather, it speaks of a memory that does not quite belong to her, but which nonetheless carries the power to affect her viscerally: "she had felt nauseated for hours after the incident" (1). Ruth's desire carries clear echoes of postmemory, which works against forgetting, invoking as it does an unconscious act of memorial engagement. Ruth, we discover, has been prone to these unconscious acts of engagement throughout her life: as a child, for example, she had inexplicable access to knowledge that had not been shared with her: "'I did tell Malka that you did know that somebody did pull her hair out,' Edek said. 'She said it was impossible'. 'How could you know?' Malka said. 'You was six years old. You was not in Auschwitz.'… 'Even Mum didn't know about Malka's hair,' Edek said. Ruth felt sick" (53).

Ruth's relationship to this type of knowledge is ambiguous: she surrounds herself with facts and figures, almost as a form of insulation against real engagement with the horrors of her parents' past: "forty-five percent of German doctors became members of the Nazi party during the Third Reich. Ruth knew that from her reading" (22-23); "she didn't want to hear the stories of babies used as footballs by the Gestapo" (22). Here, Ruth appears to embrace the objectivity of statistical data even as she distances herself from the subjective suffering offered by narrative accounts of Nazi atrocity. It is as if she is, paradoxically, trying to avoid the very emotional engagement that she is seeking by returning to Poland with her father. It seems that Ruth, like the reader, is not really sure of what she knows or what she wants. It is implied repeatedly throughout the text that Ruth's obsessive-compulsive disorder, to which can be attributed this mania for facts and figures, is a direct result of being a child of survivors, and therefore never feeling quite safe in the world, but without knowing why:

> It was a world where everything was erratic…The murderers of these dead people were rarely referred to, and Ruth, as a child often wondered who they were, and if she would recognise them if she passed them on the street. For years she used to examine the faces of passing strangers to see if they contained evidence of murderousness. (44)

> Something out of her mother's control had driven Rooshka to have Ruth's hair cut off. Ruth knew that it must have been connected with the chopping off of her mother's own long, thick plaits, in Auschwitz. (99)

Again this sense of permanent instability can be read as the work of the amnesiac consciousness, externalised via the narrative quest for knowledge that will restore memory, or at least construct a memory that is capable of filling the void. Here we can read the dialectic between the personal and the cultural, as Ruth seeks to encounter (or construct) knowledge of the cultural trauma that has informed her own identity. As part of her quest, Ruth seeks to clarify her relationship with the past by tying experiences to physical spaces. However, she once again finds herself at a crisis point of disjunction: between the symbolic narrative attached to these tourist sites (such as the remnants of the Warsaw ghetto wall), again expressed as statistical data, and the semiotic emotional response that renders her

speechless, which cannot be narrated through either numbers or words: "By the end of 1941, less than two years after the ghetto had been formed, over one hundred thousand Jews had died of exhaustion and starvation…Ruth wept. 'It is just a wall,' Edek said. 'It is just a wall.' He repeated. But the expression on his face was at odds with his language and his tone" (90-91). In this extract, Ruth's father, Edek, seeks to override his own memory of the ghetto experience with the words "It is just a wall" as though he can erase the horror of his experience by substituting an alternative narrative. Edek's approach to language is idiosyncratic in nature, and Brett uses his non-fluency in English as a tool with which to explore this disjunction between signifier and signified, or between experience and symbolic representation. Edek's insistence on using the auxiliary verb "did" in his construction of the past tense (as in the citation above, referring to Ruth's subconscious knowledge) reveals the synthetic, constructed nature of language when it is applied to experience: by using all of the constituent parts of the sentence, language loses what ability it had to express emotion and becomes instead a stilted symbolic framework. Although Ruth expects Edek to experience some sort of catharsis at being able to use his native Polish, he himself comments: "It is all right…I can speak Polish, I can speak English, I can speak German" (96). For Edek, it seems, one language is of as much (or as little) use as another when it comes to voicing his experiences of the Holocaust.

Much of Ruth's relationship with the world around her is governed by the act of substituting words. This is reflected throughout the narrative, which is often halted as Ruth considers alternative words to substitute in order to create different meanings within her self-narrative: "She hated the word 'date'…It was hard to come up with a better word. 'Rendezvous' or 'assignation' suggested a mystery that wasn't present on most dates. An evening of 'social intercourse' was too wordy, although it did possess the stilted quality of many dates. So Ruth, too, used the word 'date'" (33). Ruth's preoccupation with words is, in part, one of the ways in which she defines her identity: "Why do Jews have this obsession with words? 'Because we talk so much,' Ruth said. 'We need all the words we can get'" (115).

In this instance, Ruth substitutes a love of words for the gaps in her own sense of Jewish identity: gaps that are formed by a lack of memory which is itself conditioned by her parents' suffering. Developing this, Ruth makes her living writing letters for people who are unable to find words of their own; a profession that she finds both satisfying and immensely problematic: "Nothing is simple any more. Not even owning your own letters" (102). Ruth uses her letter-writing as a repository for the emotional engagement that she has been unable to secure in her personal life, either from her parents or any of her three husbands: "Ruth liked writing the love letters. She often made herself cry writing a love letter. She would become so immersed in the letter that she would get a jolt when she realised that the sentiments that were making her cry were of her own fabrication" (58). From this we are able to infer two things: first, that language is not tied to a particular experience or emotion, for if Ruth is able to manipulate language in such a way as to perfectly address the relationship between strangers, then language itself appears fickle and insubstantial. Second, we can identify within Ruth's letter-writing a distillation of the relationship between the Holocaust and contemporary cultural memory of the event, which is essentially a symbolic narrative constructed out of the same *clichés* and empty signifiers that Ruth employs to create a synthetic emotional engagement in her love letters. The catharsis that Ruth wishes for Edek is constructed for the reader within the pages of a Holocaust narrative such as *Too Many Men*; however, it is a false catharsis predicated upon the expected and accepted tropes of Holocaust cultural memory. The quest for knowledge that Ruth has embarked upon is resolved when she discovers information about an elder brother who was born in a displaced persons' camp following her parents' liberation. This sense of resolution is problematic, for as Robert Eaglestone observes, "The potential closure offered by the discovery of this next secret offers a questionable redemption, something that fills the holes of memory" (116). To suggest, as this narrative does, that the gaps in cultural memory surrounding the Holocaust can be filled by obtaining further knowledge assumes an ontological approach to cultural memory that belies the complexity of the fragmented relationship between contemporary cultural identity and narratives of the past. It is also at odds with the disjunction between knowing and understanding, identified above, that is played out throughout much of the narrative. This suggests an amnesiac quality about the novel itself, with regard to how it views the construction of cultural memory and its own position within that process. This sense of

amnesia can be identified across a range of contemporary Holocaust narratives, and will be discussed in greater detail later in this paper.

Just as the relationship between knowledge, understanding, memory and truth forms a spectrum of shades of grey within cultural memory of the Holocaust, so Ruth's own relationship to the 'truth' is just as complex, conditioned by a desire for experiential memory to fill the gaps in her existence:

> The truth had appeared obscure to Ruth, from the time she was a child. She used to lie a lot. She made things up. As a six-year-old she spun whole stories around her lies. Stories of poverty and hardship…She had made up relatives. Aunts, uncles, cousins. She made up cousins she loved and cousins she disliked. She had made up favourite names and favourite grandparents. She invented eight grandparents. (133-34)

Clearly, Ruth's childhood need to narrate an extended family into existence can be said to stem from the massive absence of the same, caused by the loss of both her parents' families in the Holocaust: "The Buchbinders, the Spindlers, the Knobels, and the Brajtsztajns were all related to the Rothwaxes. They were all from Lodz. And they were all dead" (135). The habit of lying, of storytelling, extends into her adult life as a means of creating and affirming her identity. The practice of constructing narratives (both personal and cultural) as consolatory substitutes for understanding, experience and identity is readily identifiable within contemporary Holocaust narratives written by the descendents of survivors, and also those written by authors who have no personal or familial links to the Holocaust outside of their own cultural amnesia. This can be read as indicative of the extent to which the contemporary cultural imagination is dependent upon such narratives to plug the gap in memory. This conceit, of narrative as memory's 'sticking-plaster,' also permeates the text of Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated*.

Amnesia and Illumination: "Everything Is Illuminated"

Everything Is Illuminated contains three narrative strands that are very closely linked: each would not be possible without the other two. The first strand encountered by the reader is the first-person narrative of Alexander Perchov, an eighteen year-old Ukrainian who is employed as a translator for his father's tourism business: a company that specialises in tours "for Jewish people…who have cravings to leave that ennobled country like America and visit humble towns in Poland and Ukraine" (3). It is immediately apparent to the reader that these tours consist of American Jews wishing to visit the sites of the concentration camps. Alex, however, is shrouded in ignorance: a substantial portion of his narrative is given over to his journey towards knowledge. Alex narrates the story of one such tour: the journey of a young writer named Jonathan Safran Foer, and referred to throughout by Alex as "the hero," in other words, the focal point of the quest. Alex and his grandfather have been hired to take Jonathan to find a Shtetl named Trachimbrod, from which his grandfather escaped to America in 1941. The second narrative strand is a magic-realist fictional narrative constructed by Jonathan upon his return to America to represent the history of the Shtetl, which has been completely destroyed by the Nazis. The final narrative strand is epistolary and is made up of letters sent by Alex to Jonathan after the latter has returned to America. By this point (possibly as a result of the journey they shared), the two have developed a close friendship: Jonathan, we can infer, has been sending Alex drafts of his fictional history, and the letters represent Alex's reaction to these. Within any of these narrative strands, there is little by way of direct reference to the Holocaust, although it permeates the text on every level. It is left to the reader to uncover what he/she can in-between the lines of narrative, to seek his/her own 'illumination.' Together, Alex and Jonathan provide a twin representation of the position of the reader: Alex's well-meaning ignorance plays off against Jonathan's quest for knowledge. Within this dialectic, Alex is representative of the perceived knowledge that twenty-first century Western culture (specifically American culture) believes that it holds about the Holocaust. In the early part of his narrative, Alex represents himself as a man of the world, a man brimming with knowledge and experience: "I have tutored Little Igor to be a man of the world. For an example, I exhibited him a smutty magazine three days yore, so that he should be appraised of all the positions in which I am carnal" (3). All of Alex's knowledge, however, is later revealed to be a part of his narrative device—a story that, like Ruth, he tells himself in

order to reassure and reaffirm his existence: "*all of the stories that I told you about my girls who dub me All Night, Baby, and Currency were not-truths, and they were not befitting not-truths. I think I manufacture these not-truths because it makes me feel like a premium person*" (144). In this manner, Alex's 'knowledge' of the world is very similar to the 'knowledge' of the Holocaust constructed within cultural memory; we tell ourselves the story of the Holocaust, and this act of narration removes the need for any further traumatic confrontation with the reality of the past. Although ostensibly the tour-guide within the narrative, entrusted with leading Jonathan on a journey through strange, foreign lands and languages, Alex himself is on a journey towards knowledge, even though initially he does not realise this. This journey leads him to an awareness of his history and heritage, of who he is, and of his position in the world: "*That is a dream that I have woken up from. I will never see America, and neither will Little Igor, and I understand that now*" (241). However, this journey of self-discovery for Alex also leads to the suicide of his grandfather, following revelations about his behaviour during the war (During an *Aktion*, Alex Sr., afraid for his own wife and child, ignored the pleas for help from his Jewish best friend with the result that the latter was killed along with the other Jews in the village). The grandson of a passive bystander to the horrors of the Holocaust, Alex himself becomes the archetype of a bystander (to Jonathan's quest) who is drawn in and tainted by his association with the events of the Holocaust. Ultimately, Alex's constructed self-narrative is blown apart by the facts of history, and by the memory of his grandfather's (in)actions.

If Alex is the embodiment of well-meaning ignorance within *Everything Is Illuminated*, then Jonathan begins the novel as a representation of the reader's quest for knowledge. In narrative terms, Jonathan is almost Alex's double: they are the same age and both have a history and heritage within Ukraine. However, because of the intervention of history, Jonathan has been raised in America and has now returned to the birthplace of his grandfather, seeking a narrative account of his own heritage: "I want to see Trachimbrod… to see what it's like, how my grandfather grew up, where I would be right now if it weren't for the war" (59). It is expected that the reader will identify with Jonathan in his quest for knowledge, he being "the hero." Whilst this is certainly the case, it is also true, as we have seen, that the reader experiences a certain amount of identification with Alex as well. Thus it is possible to argue that Jonathan and Alex represent two sides of the same character, symbiotically linked by the absence of memory that characterises cultural amnesia. As the narrative arrives in what remains of Trachimbrod, the trajectories of the two characters cross: at the last remaining house in the Shtetl, examining the physical traces of memories guarded by the only survivor of the Nazi massacre. It is here that Alex begins his journey into awareness as he begins to uncover his grandfather's act. Jonathan, on the other hand, moves from knowledge towards the absence of knowledge: there is no story, no narrative for him to uncover. Jonathan's moment of 'illumination' is, paradoxically, the revelation of no-knowledge. In the absence of either history or memory, Jonathan is forced to fill the space with a fictional narrative; he thus completes the circle of the characters' respective journeys by ending where Alex began, by substituting a fictionalised account of himself and his past. It is following the moment of 'illumination' that the outlines of each character become increasingly blurred, or as Alex writes to Jonathan: "*We are with each other, working on the same story, and I am certain that you can also feel it. Do you know* […] *that I am your grandmother and you are Grandfather, and that I am Alex and you are you, and that I am you and you are me? Do you not comprehend that we can bring each other safety and peace?*" (214). The dialectical relationship enacted between Alex and Jonathan serves to embody the complexity of the reader's relationship to the Holocaust within *Everything Is Illuminated*: at once knowledgeable and without knowledge, seeking answers but forced to embrace fiction as the only available narrative response. This dialectic also encompasses much of the modern cultural response to the Holocaust: within the narrative of *Everything Is Illuminated*, Alex is Jonathan and Jonathan is Alex, grandson of victim and grandson of bystander become indistinguishable. For Eaglestone, this relationship "seems to stress an awareness of the seamless web of human relations, and that a novel about the Holocaust is also a novel about all the others less or more involved" (131).

The notion of 'substituting words' as a paradigm for understanding cultural amnesia is further apparent within *Everything Is Illuminated* in the form of the language used by Alex to construct his illusory self-narrative. In a clear echo of Edek's idiosyncratic language-use within

Too Many Men, Alex is an expert in mistranslation. It is easy to identify his broken English as a representation of the shattering effect that the Holocaust has had on both language and culture as a whole. In particular, Alex's constant malapropisms such as "seeing-eye bitch" and "I have a miniature brother who dubs me Alli" (1) serve as a reminder of the disjunction between signified and signifier within the amnesiac consciousness; microcosmically citing the inadequacy of both language and narrative to frame the absences of cultural memory. It is interesting that Ruth Rothwax is comforted by her father's unique approach to the English language: "Ruth was too distressed to be reassured by his pronunciation of 'lounge.' From the day he had learned the word he had pronounced it 'lunge'" (161); Edek's persistent mispronunciation marks him out as a non-native speaker of English and by implication threads his Holocaust experience into every line of his speech. The fact that Ruth is reassured, rather than threatened, by this discord suggests that it speaks to her of the only cultural identity that she has ever known: the mistranslated identity of exile. But Alex does not only mistranslate language: he also misrepresents history, memory and experience. In addition to representing the 'constructed' knowledge of the reader, Alex in his ignorance also acts as a foil through which Foer is able to test the reader's engagement with the Holocaust. As I have mentioned, there is little overt reference to the Holocaust within any of the three narrative strands, apart from at the climax of the novel, where all three strands converge at the events of 1941. Throughout the remainder of the text, it is left to the reader to pick up on signposts and clues that are dropped by Foer, usually littering Alex's narrative: an example of this is his lack of understanding as to the true nature of the holiday firm operated by his father. Alex's lack of knowledge serves to sharpen the reader's own appreciation of what the company name, 'Heritage Touring,' really stands for. The effect here is that Alex's ignorance highlights the reader's own knowledge. There are many more examples of this throughout Alex's narratives: when he anticipates Jonathan's reaction to the blue and yellow streamers decorating Lvov station ("Perhaps he would think that the yellow and blue papers were for him, because I know that they are the Jewish colours" [31]), the reader is able to substitute the yellow star and the *Blauschein* into Alex's semi-approximation of history. Likewise when he describes "the Jews from the history books, with no hairs and prominent bones" (32), the reader automatically substitutes his/her knowledge of well-known Holocaust images such as those of the liberation of Bergen-Belsen. Of course, Alex's version of history is coloured by his social environment: he has been brought up in Ukraine, for half of his life under Soviet rule. He has not had the same access to the Holocaust that the Western reader has had; thus his cultural memory of the event is drastically different, almost non-existent in fact. This explicit lack serves in turn to highlight the inadequacy of the systems of shared meaning that the reader calls upon in order to fill the gaps in Alex's narrative; for by assuming a position of ontological authority with regard to the Holocaust, the readers simultaneously reveal themselves to be lacking in awareness and understanding as to the untenability of such a position. The impossibility of this perspective is distilled within the narrative of *Everything Is Illuminated* in a meditation upon the meanings of the word 'artefact': "the product of a successful attempt to make a purposeful, useless, beautiful thing out of a past-tensed fact. It can never be art, and it can never be fact" (202). This reveals the inherent truth at the heart of contemporary Holocaust narrative, a truth which both Ruth and Jonathan appear to resist: it is caught in a dialectic between art and fact, can never be both and never be neither. The quest for knowledge as a remedy to cultural amnesia within these texts is destined to be inadequate: fact can never ameliorate the drive for emotional engagement, much as language can never fully suture the rupture in identity (both individual and cultural) that the absence of memory instigates.

Conclusion: Paradigms of Cultural Amnesia

The narratives of *Too Many Men* and *Everything Is Illuminated* are both centred on an act of pilgrimage, insofar as the narrative is driven by the physical journey of a central protagonist as he/she undertakes a quest for knowledge that will heal an amnesiac rift in personal identity, such as that posited by Hirsch's theory of postmemory. The broader narrative structure indicated by this quest for knowledge is repeated across a range of contemporary Holocaust narratives such as *The History of Love* by Nicole Krauss, *Fugitive Pieces* by Anne Michaels and *The Final Solution* by Michael Chabon. All of these texts can be categorised as quest narratives, with further knowledge of the Holocaust being their ultimate goal. The repetition of this narrative pattern suggests a congruence between the revelation of

knowledge and narrative resolution, of the type identified above by Eaglestone as being inherently problematic. Read in this way, the repeated insistence upon achieving resolution through knowledge signifies a fundamental failure of engagement within the genre of contemporary Holocaust fiction, which is repeated and re-enacted within each narrative encounter. Thus the cultural imagination that produces and consumes these narratives reproduces the amnesiac consciousness that they contain by repeating the same process without developing beyond the previous failed attempt. As noted at the outset of this paper, Stier locates this continued collective effort to achieve a memorial engagement with the Holocaust within an inherent ability to forget previous failed attempts. I would argue that this is rather the work of a cultural amnesia that is renewed by the traumatic impossibility of working-through which is signalled by each failure. In this manner, the amnesiac qualities exhibited by characters such as Ruth Rothwax, Alexander Perchov, and Jonathan Safran Foer become substitutes for the reader's own amnesiac quest for absent memory. Once again, amnesia can be understood as narrative substituted for experience. In an analysis of counter-monuments to the Holocaust that present "a model of forgetting integrated into the very fabric of memorialisation," Stier identifies the possibility of "the monument as an amnesiac construction—to remind visitors of the problematics of memorials" (213). The doubling of the amnesiac consciousness within texts such as those under discussion here invites us to read these narratives as amnesiac constructions in this manner. It may be impossible (and in fact entirely inappropriate) for narrative constructions of memory to fill the void left by the absence of genuine memorial engagement. However, by drawing the reader's attention to his/her own amnesia, such texts highlight the aporia inherent within any attempt to construct a symbolic memorial to the Holocaust. For James Young, one of the only appropriate ways to engage with the damaging impact of the Holocaust is to recognise the limits of engagement:

> so long as we are dependent on the 'vocabulary' of our culture and its sustaining archetype, it may not be possible to generate entirely new responses to catastrophe. It may now be possible, however, to respond from within our traditional critical paradigms with self-awareness of where traditionally conditioned responses lead us in the world. (192)

In an echo of this sentiment, Stier comments that "the ideal form of Holocaust memory bears within it a sense of its own deconstructive potential" (17). The paradigm of cultural amnesia presented within contemporary fictional narratives of the Holocaust thus facilitates an engagement not with memory, but with amnesia; the revelation of knowledge at the climax of the quest narrative is inverted to become a revelation of our own lack of appropriate cultural memory. The acceptance of this, and the continued effort to understand in the face of the knowledge that one will never understand, enables us to at least honour the continuing trauma of survivors and ensures that, whilst we must learn to live with cultural amnesia, we cannot forget.

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