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The Quest for Narrative Reconstruction: Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything is Illuminated*

A tactless bag of tired postmodernist tricks?

The hopeful reconstructive note on which *House of Leaves*, in spite of its dark and pessimistic immediate appearance, has been seen to conclude becomes much more pronounced in *Everything is Illuminated* by Jonathan Safran Foer. The move beyond postmodernism in *House of Leaves* simultaneously explores two possibilities between which the novel hovers: an extreme postmodernism which results in nihilism on the one hand, and an increased commitment in community and communication which gives expression to a reconstructive hopefulness on the other. While by no means unambiguous about its own project, *Everything is Illuminated*, in contrast, is much more decisive in its investment in reconstructive optimism. Meanwhile, it pitches itself not so much against those postmodernist existential doubts Danielewski’s novel was concerned with, but focuses more on ethical questions posed by a postmodernist celebration of ambiguity and subversion. Combining two storylines – one relying on a mimetic stance, the other developing a fantastic narrative that explicitly leans towards the marvellous – the novel increasingly shifts its attention from the possibility or impossibility of representation towards the responsibilities of fictions, to their communicative value and their creative power.

Another debut novel, *Everything is Illuminated* draws no less upon a broad stock of typically postmodernist elements than *House of Leaves* does. As Brian Myers writes in a scathing review polemically entitled “A Bag of Tired Tricks. Blank Pages? Photos of Mating Tortoises? The Death Throes of the Postmodern Novel”: “The disjointed story narrated in different “voices,” the author turning up under his own name as a character writing a novel, the final chapter ending in mid-sentence,
idiosyncratic punctuation and eye-catching TYPOGRAPHY – need I go on?’ This list, as Myers implies, could easily be extended. It may serve as an apt illustration of the capaciousness of the concept of postmodernism that Foer’s and Danielewski’s novels should nevertheless be so radically different in many ways. And it is precisely because they each engage with significantly divergent aspects of postmodernist thought and aesthetics that the similarities which can be found in their reconstructive endeavours become all the more striking. Whereas Danielewski’s novel engages first and foremost with the philosophy and practice of deconstruction that had such an immense influence on postmodernist discourse, Foer implicitly takes up a scarcely less influential strand of postmodernist thought: one that arguably takes its origin in Jean-François Lyotard’s seminal work on *The Postmodern Condition*.

Controversial as the definition of postmodernism is, most agree that it is concerned with

a contesting of what Lyotard calls the totalizing master narratives of our culture, those systems by which we usually unify and order (and smooth over) any contradictions in order to make them fit. This challenge foregrounds the process of meaning-making in the production and reception of art, but also in broader discursive terms: it foregrounds, for instance, how we make historical ‘facts’ out of brute ‘events’ of the past, or, more generally, how our various sign systems grant meaning to our experience. (Hutcheon, *Poetics* x)

The example Linda Hutcheon chooses in this description is not arbitrary. The concern with history and context is central to her particular understanding of postmodernism. Postmodernist scepticism concerning unifying totalities like truth, identity and reality, its emphasis on textuality and the process of enunciation, its exposure and blurring of ontological boundaries and its propensity to genre-mixing frequently join ranks in a struggle against received notions of the historical past. For Hutcheon, then, the most typically postmodernist literary texts are ‘those un-innocent paradoxical historiographic metafictions [that] situ-ate themselves within historical discourse, while refusing to surrender their autonomy as fiction’ (*Poetics* 124).

The affinities of Foer’s novel to such a poetics are obvious. When Jonathan, the fictional persona of the author as protagonist of the novel, is faced with the complete eradication of the Jewish shtetl Trachimbrod, which was the home of his grandfather Safran before the Second World War, he starts to write a story about its inhabitants,