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# Criticism as Redemption: Jonathan Safran Foer's Theory of Meaning

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Criticism as Redemption: Jonathan Safran Foer's  
Theory of Meaning

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

Criticism as Redemption: Jonathan Safran Foer's

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Not long after the release of his first novel, *Everything is Illuminated*, critics and authors alike began showering Jonathan Safran Foer with both praise and disparagement for his postmodern style. Yet, this large body of criticism ignores the theoretical work taking place within Foer's fiction. This thesis attempts to fill this gap by highlighting specific aspects of Foer's theoretical work as it relates to the creation of meaning in a text and to explore what this work might imply for the broader literary community.

Much of Foer's work toys with the capacity of language to express meaning, indulging in the playfulness of language throughout his work to highlight the place where at written language blurs the line between word and flesh, or language and experience. In this playfulness, Foer seems to assert that meaning is created in the space between language and experience through the act of metaphor. This theory of metaphor places the individual, the author, and the critic all in a creative position and the narrative content of Foer's works examines how this creative power is used by individuals to create a world of meaning out of experiences that seem to have none. In this way, Foer argues that the creative act of metaphor is a redemptive act—an act of saving one's self from the void. Such a conclusion can be applied to all who use the word to create, particularly authors and critics, wherein the creative act as well as the interpretive act become acts of redemption.

Keywords: literary criticism, deconstruction, Jonathan Safran Foer

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## Criticism as Redemption: Jonathan Safran Foer's Theory of Meaning

Not long after the release of his first novel, *Everything is Illuminated* (2002), critics and authors alike began showering Jonathan Safran Foer with praise. Dale Peck, notoriously harsh critic of *The New Republic*, went so far as to claim, "To call it the best first novel I've ever read belittles it: it is one of the best novels I've ever been fortunate enough to hold in my hands" (qtd. in "Press Release"). In predictable manner, other critics responded just as strongly, but with disdain. In his review of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (*EL&IC*, 2005), "Extremely Cloying and Incredibly False," Harry Siegel describes Foer's second novel as "an Oprah-etic paean to innocence and verbosity" (par. 8). Invoking Oprah to describe a work of literature, Siegel relegates Foer to the trash-heap of middle-brow sentimentality and mawkishness. Thus, by the release of this sophomore effort, Foer was being hailed by one half of the literary world as the voice of his generation and attacked by the other for being a manipulative hack.

These polar responses descend from two alternative opinions of what is the appropriate method of addressing tragic subject matter. In two novels Foer manages to address the Holocaust, 9/11, Dresden, and Hiroshima. Some critics, namely Siegel and his contemporaries Tom Bissell and Stefan Beck, accuse Foer of using these sensitive and important subjects to add non-existent depth to his work, while covering the severity of these tragedies with an unrealistic sheen of hope and redemption. However, critically praised authors, such as Joyce Carol Oates, David Foster Wallace, and John Updike praise his inventiveness and sincerity in addressing these tragic topics. On both sides, Foer's methods play a central role in these debates. Foer does provide a feast of postmodern and textual tricks in his works—everything from using a fictional version of himself as the central character in his first novel to ending his second novel with a flip book. Some critics, like B. R. Meyers, accuse him of using, "A Bag of Tired Tricks," merely

rehashing pre-worn postmodern contrivances to lend his novels the illusion of inventiveness. Supporters Oates and Salman Rushdie identify this same tendency towards the ornate and extravagant, yet praise it. Oates praises his “storytelling acrobatics,” while Rushdie applauds Foer’s second work for being “ambitious, pyrotechnic, and riddling” (qtd. in “Press Release”). Each side notes Foer’s flashy methods, but they each provide radically different analyses of their validity as literary methods.

Yet in all this debate over the “literariness” of his subjects and style, little to no attention has been paid to the theoretical implications of Foer’s postmodern invocations for both his work and for literature at large. Foer’s postmodern methods, although admittedly flamboyant, are not simply a grab bag of showy tricks, but instead, a means through which Foer forwards a particular philosophical understanding of how meaning is created and how language relates to reality. He seems to assert through his works that meaning is created through the unique and variable exchange of both the word and the world. This understanding, like much contemporary literature and criticism, descends directly from postmodern thought, particularly deconstruction. Foer, however, takes the conclusions of deconstruction in a different direction than most contemporary writers and critics to illustrate that the creation of meaning is, indeed, a creative act, which every individual can actively engage in as a means to redemption from the indeterminacy, chaos, and nothingness deconstruction revealed to be inherent to existence.

#### Deconstruction and Literary Criticism

Although postmodern philosophy currently holds a much less prominent position in literary studies than it once did, few would deny that postmodern thought radically altered the theoretical foundations of literary criticism during the twentieth century. Deconstruction and the work of Jacques Derrida played a particularly central role in this restructuring. Previous to the

advent of postmodern philosophy in literary theory in the 1960s and 1970s, literary criticism was generally dominated by a conception of language that descends from the tradition of what deconstruction would identify as Western metaphysics—a tradition begun in Greek philosophy, carried on in Christian theology, and still present in the natural sciences. In Derrida's foundational critique of Western metaphysics, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," Derrida explains this tradition:

Its matrix . . . is the determination of being as *presence* in all the senses of this word. It would be possible to show that all the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the center have always designated the constant of a presence—*eidos, arche, telos, energeia, ousia* (essence, existence, substance, subject) *aletheia*, transcendentality, consciousness, or conscience, God, man, and so forth. (*Writing* 279)

This foundational assumption of Being as presence holds within it broad implications for language. Within this determination, language, or the word, is given secondary status to an idealized or transcendent reality. The word never signifies in itself, but constantly refers to something else more real or more true. It is always in search of something beyond itself, a reality more sensible, more absolute, more present: "As the face of pure intelligibility, it [the sign] refers to an absolute logos to which it is immediately united" (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 13). This absolute logos provides the foundation or origin upon which language and Being are structured, and the indeterminable, chaotic, and unknown that torment both language and existence are put to rest. According to Derrida, Western metaphysics as a whole is determined by a "desire for firm and final ground, for building land, the ground as a support for an artificial



structure” (Derrida, “White” 23). These foundations are usually known as Truth, Knowledge, Ethics, or Religion.

This determination of Being as presence and the desire for firm ground behind it also provided the foundation for the literary theories of modernism. The most notable modernist theories, formalism and new criticism, operate within the belief that every text has specific and inherent meaning and that the quality and truthfulness of this meaning can be judged and measured by a standard. For example, M.H. Abrams writes in a defense of the assumptions of these theories of literary interpretation, “The basic materials of history are written texts; and the authors who wrote these texts . . . exploited the possibilities and norms of their inherited language to say something determinate, and assumed that competent readers, insofar as these shared their own linguistic skills, would be able to understand what they said” (426). This conception of language, which extends from the assumption that language represents present realities, concepts, and truths, can be seen in the works of critics such as I.A Richards, Roman Jakobson, and even T.S. Eliot. To varying degrees, their works center on the belief that a text has a static and inherent meaning independent of the reader and representative of reality.

Deconstruction sought to dismantle this conception of language and the assumptions that supported it by illustrating that language does not signify through reference, but rather through “play”—through the unpredictable movement and activity of varying aspects of the word and the world as they interact, contradict, and signify. Deconstruction did so by illustrating that reality and language exist and mean only as they emerge from a field of absence, from the empty, non-space of *différance*, which is neither foundation nor origin, but the blank page upon which the play of difference and deferral allow the world to come forward and signify.

According to Derrida, the word signifies only by means of spatial and temporal differences between given shapes articulated against this blank background of *différance*. He writes, “Difference is articulation” (*Of Grammatology* 66). The play of difference between the shape of one letter and the next and the deferment of the appearance of one letter and the next are the means to signification—not reference to material or transcendental reality. The trace *between* these differences and the memory between the appearing and the appeared, then, connect these moments of distinct articulation in order that they might mean. Derrida explains, “Without a retention in the minimal unit of temporal experience, without a trace retaining the other as other in the same, no difference would do its work and no meaning would appear” (*Of Grammatology* 62). Articulation and signification then emerge from absence through the haunting of the trace between what is always-already gone and what is about to come. In this way, language is fluid, imprecise, and playful as it emerges from the interaction of these differences.

After the delivery of “Structure, Sign and Play” in 1966, Derrida’s new assumptions of were slowly absorbed into the foundations of literary criticism, first through the work of the post-structuralists and deconstructionists in the 1960s and 1970s, and later, in a less obvious form, through the work of the cultural critics of the 1980s. As a result of this assimilation, the earlier assumption that a text is static and representative was widely replaced by a new assumption that no fundamental relationship exists between sign and signified and that language is ambivalent, ambiguous, and duplicitous. In this move, the coherence formerly provided by language’s referential relationship to reality was disrupted, and the text was set at play within the indeterminacy of *différance*.

However, in order to perform literary criticism one must have some means of finding coherence and structuring meaning within a text. Many contemporary critics, particularly those

who perform cultural criticism, new historicism, post-colonialism, or gender studies, find this coherence within the material, social, and political realities within which an author, a text, and a reader are embedded. These critics attempt what Gerald Graff promotes: “Instead of trying to superimpose coherence from above, we should try to locate the principle of coherence in the cultural conversation itself in all its contentiousness” (54). According to Terry Eagleton, however, this turn towards the cultural is inherent within the very work of the critic. He writes,

Indeed literary theory is less an object of intellectual enquiry in its own right than a particular perspective in which to view the history of our times. . . . For any body of theory concerned with human meaning, value, language, feeling and experience will inevitably engage with broader, deeper beliefs about the nature of human individuals and societies, problems of power and sexuality, interpretations of past history, versions of the present and hopes for the future. (170)

From this perspective, language is subjective and ambiguous but deeply associated with the time and place within which it is structured, therefore both words and the interpretations of words reveal something objective about culture, politics, ideology, or even sex.

Foer’s works do not disregard these valid conclusions about the relationship between interpretation and culture, but they do suggest that coherence might also be found right within the subject itself and in so doing offer a new way of reading and theorizing literature. Foer embraces the subjectivity and multiplicity of the text, but rather than grounding the language of a text in its material and historical context, he seems to assert that meaning emerges from the interplay *between* language and the world—between word and flesh—through the work of individuals that are structuring that meaning. This alternative understanding of meaning, although subtle in its difference, suggests an entirely different understanding of what and why

literature is, and therefore, a new understanding of what and why literary criticism is. This alternative understanding provides a path out of deconstruction that rejects both transcendental and cultural foundations and re-contextualizes the meaning and coherence of a text in the subjectivity of the author, reader, or critic.

### The Limits and Excesses of Language

Much like deconstruction, Foer's alternative understanding of meaning begins with a concern for the limits and excesses of language. Most of Foer's work expresses a concern for what is lost in language and simultaneously, what goes beyond language. This concern is exemplified in the short story "A Primer for the Punctuation of Heart Disease" (2002). In it, Foer invents a series of punctuation marks that are designed to express what falls between the gaps of words alone, while bringing out what is already in words, but perhaps not fully understood. For example, the willed silence mark—"g"—represents the meaningful silences language can never capture. It "signifies an intentional silence, the conversational equivalents of building a wall over which you can't climb, through which you can't see, against which you break the bones of your hands and wrists" (par. 3). On the other hand, the pedal point—"~"—"is distinguished from the ellipsis and the dash in that the thought it follows is neither incomplete nor interrupted but an outstretched hand" (par. 13). This mark highlights the meaning already hiding within words by attempting to give it unique signification. Ironically, the marks themselves are an attempt to articulate that which escapes articulation, but still succeed in hinting at something more. In this fashion, the punctuation marks emphasize both the poverty and promise of language, both what is lost and found.

Similarly, the short story "About the Typefaces Not Used in This Edition" (2002) plays with the physical representation of words in order to explore the limits and excesses of language.

The short story is a description of the extraordinary typefaces that were rejected in the printing of the fictional life story of the protagonist, Henry, as he falls in love with his wife and eventually watches her slowly die. The short story does not proceed by conventional means, however, for Henry's story is hinted at, but never told. Rather, it progresses from typeface to typeface, highlighting how each new type seeks to represent the meaning of the love story in more and more concrete forms while never coming closer to the "true meaning" of the protagonist's love and loss.

By toying with the ways that the physical representation of the words impacts the meaning of the story as a whole, Foer highlights both what is caught and lost in attempts to express meaning through language. For example, the typeface Trans-1, 10 Point, "refreshes itself continuously on the screen, words being replaced by their synonyms" (par. 6). The creator hoped that the synonyms "would illuminate the richness of language, the interconnectedness, the nuance of the web," but the typeface only illustrated "its inadequate approximations, how a web is made of holes, how the river of words flows always away from us" (par. 6). On the other hand, Trans 2, 10 Point, continuously refreshes itself with a word's antonym. The creator hoped this typeface would "illuminate the poverty of language, its inadequate approximations, how a web is made of holes" (par. 7). However, it actually showed "the string connecting those holes, and caught in the net is the shadow of meaning" (par. 7). Trans 2 emphasizes the excesses and riches of language, not its failures. In like manner, each of the typefaces highlights in new form what is hidden both beyond and within language, forcing the reader to more closely examine the complex relationship between language, reality, and meaning.

As similar explorations into language develop in nearly all of Foer's work, it becomes clear that his works are not a lament for what is lost in language, but rather an emphatic

argument about the nature of language itself, emphasizing both its poverty and promise. If language always says more and less than we intend, then it cannot simply signify and mean by representing reality. It must proceed by other means entirely. As Foer illustrates, language moves towards signification and meaning by angles and approximations, with diversions and tricks, missteps and circuitous routes. It is duplicitous and ambiguous. It never says exactly what we think we intend, but says more than we could have imagined, simultaneously falling short of and exceeding what we think we have captured. Simplified, language proceeds not by representation, but by “play,” which is to say, by metaphor.

### Language as Metaphor

By challenging the assumption that language represents static transcendent meaning, Foer liberates language from the rule of the transcendental signified and illustrates that language proceeds by “play,” or in the language of deconstruction, by difference, deferment, and the trace. I describe this play as metaphor as it is the term that most aptly marks the space of the long philosophical debate on the relationship between literal and figurative, sign and signified, word and world in which Derridean deconstruction engages—a debate that Foer himself explores. Nietzsche, however, was the first to argue that language is metaphor. In the essay “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense” (1873), he argues that all words, and by implication all Truths, are nothing more than metaphors humans have forgotten are actually metaphors. Words are always separated from the thing-itself by flesh, nerve stimulus, concept, and translation three times removed from the thing-itself. Hence, words are nothing more than approximations and translations—metaphors that in no way correspond to or represent reality. Nietzsche writes, “We believe that we know something about the things themselves when we speak of trees, colors, snow, and flowers; and yet we possess nothing but metaphors for things—metaphors which

correspond in no way to the original entities” (55). In this, he identifies the fallacy of Western metaphysics that the inability of language to fully represent the world is a failure, illustrating that this “failure” is inherent in and natural to language itself.

Foer also recognizes this fallacy and literalizes it in the final type described in “About the Typefaces Not Used in This Edition.” The typeface “Real Time, Real World, To Scale” attempts to overcome language’s failure to represent reality by moving beyond signification to become the thing-itself. Begun with the hope of every idea having “a corresponding symbol,” the typeface evolved from a typographical symbol for every word into a real-time, real-world replication of the thing-itself (par. 16). Yet, even this type was inadequate as it erased the lines between being and meaning, or what is and what is expressed, forcing everyone to wonder whether they “were living as autonomous beings, or characters in a story” (par. 18). Rather than enlightening meaning, giving breath and form to what needed to be expressed, the new typeface only robbed reality of its poignancy, legitimacy, and strength. In this typeface, Foer furthers Nietzsche’s argument to illustrate that language *must* proceed by metaphor, for if it were ever to move beyond metaphoricity to become the thing-itself, language would no longer give meaning to reality; it would only become a misleading duplication of reality that humanity would still have to translate from flesh, to nerve stimulus, to concept.

Derrida makes a similar argument in his essay “White Mythology” (1974), but moves metaphor from the realm of synaptic and conceptual translation into the realm of play. He writes, “In non-sense, language is not yet born. In truth, language should be in a state of plenitude, fulfillment, and actualization to the point of self-effacement, there being no possible play before the thing (the thought) which is there properly made manifest” (41-42). In other words, without language, there is no sense, expression, or thought. Yet, any language that becomes the thing-

itself, as in Real Time, Real World, To Scale, effaces itself and all it sought to express. The flaws and misrepresentations that make language inadequate to represent meaning literally make it possible for language to express any meaning. Metaphor, then, is the only means through which language can proceed—metaphor as “play.” As Derrida argues, “Thought happens upon metaphor, or metaphor is the lot of thought at the moment at which a sense attempts to emerge of itself to say itself, to express itself, to bring itself into the light of language” (32). Language is metaphor because it exists outside the conceptual structures of Western metaphysics—literal and figurative, absence and presence, fact and fiction—for according to Nietzsche, Derrida, and Foer, such concepts are in fact themselves merely metaphors.

The classical definition of metaphor, however, operates within these metaphysical concepts, particularly the dichotomy of literal and figurative. Aristotle was the first to discuss metaphor formally, and he defines it as “the application of an alien name by transference either from genus to species, or from species to genus, or from species to species, or by analogy, that is, by proportion” (Butcher 77-78). This classical definition has changed very little over the millennia. Most dictionaries and books on rhetoric define metaphor as a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to an object or idea to which it does not apply *literally*. It assumes that language is a signifier or representation of reality that maintains a static correlation to the world. This literality can be manipulated, as in the case of metaphor, in order to produce clever new associations and alternative *figurative* meanings by highlighting the similarities between disparate objects. Nietzsche, Derrida, and Foer each dismantle this dichotomy between literal and figurative and show that language as metaphor operates beyond such distinctions. As Derrida argues, understanding language “is not, therefore, a matter of inverting the literal meaning and the figurative meaning but of determining the ‘literal’ meaning of writing as



metaphoricity itself” (*Of Grammatology* 15). Foer’s multiple explorations of the capacity of language seem designed to force the reader to recognize this metaphorical nature of language, and in so doing, he reveals an alternative view of the relationship between word and world.

### Both Word and Flesh

Many contemporary critics also operate from a position that language is metaphor, or at least, that language is more complicated than divisions such as literal and figurative could ever imply. As I described earlier, contemporary critics like Stanley Fish, Terry Eagleton, Edward Said, and Susan Sontag often find coherence amid this indeterminacy of language by grounding language in the material, social, and political contexts in which it is produced or read. They view language and interpretation of that language as a product of the world and the word as a lens or window back onto it. Stanley Fish, for example, finds coherence in the “interpretive communities,” or culture, of those who read the text, rather than the text itself. He writes, “A sentence . . . is never in the abstract; it is always in a situation, and the situation will already have determined the purpose for which it can be used” (643). Foer’s position, however, is quite different. He implies a relationship between the material world and language that puts the two realities, word and world, on equal footing. Rather than being separate from or reflective of the material world, the word works in tandem with the world in unpredictable and variable ways in order to create meaning. Both word and flesh are *equally* implicated in meaning’s production.

Foer illustrates this view of the relationship between word and world by manipulating the physical manifestation of the word. The manner in which he toys with the way the written word simultaneously participates in both linguistic and physical reality accentuates the flow of meaning from the interaction of the two realities. For example, in the typeface ELENA, 10 point, the physicality of the written word illustrates the diminution of the original meaning of a word

through its overuse, as the word itself “disintegrates over time. The more a word is used, the more it crumbles and fades” (“About” par. 1). The very physicality of the words in this unused type contributes to expressing the words’ failure, while enlightening a unique longing and need that is buried within each individual utterance. The word attempts to express something within a human physical experience of the world, while each new attempt alters the strength and nature of the word, creating a different meaning with each unique interaction of word and world. Each time the word and the world interact it is different—it *means* something different. Through this give and take, Foer expresses the love and loss of the untold story’s protagonist, Henry, in what would have been the final pages of the printed story if this typeface had been used:

By the end of this book, utilitarian words like the, a and was would have been lost on the white page. Henry’s recurrent joys and tortures—bathwater, collarbone, vulnerability, pillowcase, bridge—would have been ruins, unintentional monuments to bathwater, collarbone, vulnerability, pillowcase and bridge. And when the life of the book dwindled to a single page, as it now does, when you held your palm against the inside of the back cover, as if it were her damp forehead, as if you could will it to persevere past its end, God would have been nearly illegible, and I completely invisible. Had Elena been used, Henry’s last words would have read:

. (par. 1)

Even in this overuse and erasure, the word still gives expression, however faulty, to Henry’s experience, and meaning unfolds within the circuitous and unpredictable routes in the space between Henry’s loss and the words used to describe it.

Throughout his works, Foer similarly plays with the physical and linguistic duplicity of the written word to highlight the ways in which the word and flesh alike are implicated in the production of meaning and elucidate the creative role of the subject in structuring the resulting meaning. The most poignant example of this lies in the grandfather, Thomas Schell, in *EL&IC*. His story is told in a series of letters written to his son, the father of the novel's central character Oskar. The first letter tells of Thomas' move to America after the death of his family, future wife, and unborn child in the bombing of Dresden and his subsequent loss of speech. Within a short time after arriving in the United States, Thomas is entirely unable to speak. He then turns to writing in blank notebooks to communicate all that he needs to say. The notebooks soon become linguistic and physical transmutations of his days and life.

The words written in the notebooks then interact with the physical world in a way that heightens and expands the meaning of both his physical and linguistic existence. For example, the strict distinction between word and flesh is dissolved as Thomas writes the songs he wishes to sing in the shower and music as ink turns to water and run down his legs; as the page of his notebook on which he has written, "I am sorry," literally wipes away the tears of his future wife; and as the cumulative days of his life captured in his book are used as doorstops, paperweights, or the lining for birdcages. Thomas writes:

I went through hundreds of books, thousands of them, they were all over the apartment, I used them as doorstops and paper weights, I stacked them if I needed to reach something, I slid them under the legs of wobbly tables, I used them as trivets and coasters, to line the birdcages and to swat insects from whom I begged forgiveness, I never thought of my books as being special, only necessary, I might

rip out a page—‘I’m sorry, this is the smallest I’ve got’— to wipe up some mess, or empty a whole day to pack up the emergency light bulbs. (28)

In this way, word and flesh become uncanny metaphors for each other as they press up against one another, adding, subtracting, and expanding the other to produce an indefinable fullness of meaning. What was initially an absence, the loss of his speech, opens the possibility of play and allows a surprising profusion of meaning to erupt between the interaction of word and flesh—a profusion of meaning that could never be expressed in word or flesh alone. The grandfather’s life, as the meeting point of these two realities, then is awash in meaning and significance, where before there was only silence.

One of the many punctuation marks Foer toys with in “A Primer for the Punctuation of Heart Disease” aptly frames this new form of metaphor at play in the grandfather’s notebooks. This punctuation mark, the reversible colon—“::”—is perfectly expressive of the reflexivity of word and flesh in this metaphorical creation of meaning. Foer explains the reversible colon:

:: Unlike the colon, which is used to mark a major division in a sentence, and to indicate that what follows is an elaboration, summation, implication, etc., of what precedes, the ‘reversible colon’ is used when what appears on either side elaborates, summates, implicates, etc., what’s on the other side. In other words, the two halves of the sentence explain each other, as in the cases of “Mother::Me,” and “Father::Death.” (par. 33)

This is the form of metaphor at play in Foer’s works. Unlike classical conceptions of language, in which the word is “an elaboration, summation, implication,” of the thing-itself, Foer’s theory of language places the word and flesh on either side of the reversible colon wherein each “elaborates, summates, implicates” the other. He shows that words and flesh are two sides of the

same coin of experience and that meaning erupts from their exchange. He makes tangible the announcement of Derrida, “Between the too warm flesh of the literal event and the cold skin of the concept runs meaning” (*Writing* 75). Out of the cracks between the physical world and the words we use to speak of it fluid, slippery meaning emerges.

Numerous examples of this type of metaphor can be found throughout Foer’s work. In the short story “Room After Room” (2007), a doctor imagines a room in which his life story is written on the walls. The meanings of various events in his life are altered, expanded and enlightened by their location in the room. Foer writes: “His life isn’t arranged in any obvious order. Some of his first hour is near the floor, some is near the ceiling. The time he lost his virginity is written around the electrical socket” (par. 38). In *Everything is Illuminated*, an old man puts his adopted daughter to sleep in a bed of crumpled newspaper and pulls her out to discover her “tattooed with the newsprint.” The resulting confrontation of word and flesh illuminates his love with a subtle profundity: “Sometimes he would rock her to sleep in his arms, and read her left to right, and knew everything he needed to know about the world. If it wasn’t written on her, it wasn’t important to him” (44). And in *EL&IC*, the grandfather, now unable to speak, communicates philosophical insights by the interaction of two tattoos on the palms of his hands. Thomas writes,

I went to a tattoo parlor and had YES written onto the palm of my left hand, and NO onto my right palm, what can I say, it hasn’t made life wonderful, its made life possible, when I rub my hands against each other in the middle of winter I am warming myself with the friction of YES and NO, when I clap my hands I am showing my appreciation through the uniting and parting of YES and NO, I

signify ‘book’ by peeling open my clapped hands as every book, for me, is the balance of YES and NO, even this one, my last one, especially this one. (17)

In each of these cases, Foer shows, admittedly through only linguistic means, possible ways in which both physical and linguistic reality can interact, press against one another, and create meaning. They never unite into one clear and present meaning, but meaning, as a third entity emerges from their interaction.

Such manipulation of the bounds between word and flesh are not limited to Foer’s characters, for Foer himself plays with the physicality of text by inserting images into the pages and manipulating the typography and spacing of the text to expand the meaning of his stories. In *EL&IC*, for example, Foer inserts images from the story into the text of the novel. Red ink circles and marks a section, altering the rhythm and meaning of what is said (208-19). The grandfather’s letters are written without paragraphs, sentences or breaks to heighten the urgency of his need to write, whereas the letters written by his wife are written in single sentence paragraphs with excessive breaks and gaps to express the absence that consumes her. The book is then concluded with a 15-page flip book that reverses the harrowing image of a man jumping from the World Trade Center during the 9/11 attacks to have him raise from the earth and land atop the building. These are the postmodern tricks and methods attacked by some critics and praised by others; yet, none of these critics seem to recognize that these methods undermine the fallacy that language represents the world itself and illustrate that meaning is fluid, complex, and produced through the interaction of both word and flesh—through the play of metaphor. And in so doing, these critics fail to recognize a new understanding of both creativity and interpretation inherent within this alternative understanding of language.

## The Centrality of Absence

As Derrida argues, “. . . metaphor is never innocent” (*Writing* 17). It is both defined by and defines how one understands language, reality, and the human relationship to both. Foer’s use of language and flesh as metaphor thus also implies a philosophical view of man’s relationship to language and reality. This view is directly descended from the movement begun when Nietzsche severed language from truth and popularized in Derrida’s discussions of *différance* and, most importantly, absence.

Nietzsche was the first to reject the submission of the word to the flesh by deconstructing the Platonic conception of transcendent Truth. He concluded in his foundational essay on metaphor, “Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions; they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force” (56). For Nietzsche, truths were impossible because the process of metaphor, inherent in the very act of perception, perpetually separated humanity from reality. Derrida later adopted Nietzsche’s conclusions but through different logic. Derrida argued that language signifies only through its relationship to absence. He writes, “If metaphor, which is *mimesis* trying its chance, *mimesis* at risk, may always fail to attain truth, this is because it has to reckon with a definite absence” (“White” 42). Language is assigned to the realm of metaphor and can never obtain the one-to-one correlation with the world assumed in Western metaphysics because meaning and reality in no place exist as present, idealized entities. The deconstructive project illustrates this again and again. Meaning results from metaphor because language and existence are predicated upon absence and signify only through the play of difference and deferment upon the blank, non-space of *différance*, which allows one moment of signification to distinctly come forward and mean.

This relationship between language and absence is exemplified in writing and begins with writing's most basic element—the letter. As the non-space of the white page gives permission to the letters “to spell themselves out and to signify,” the letter speaks, in both form and function of the negative origin of meaning in *differánce* (*Writing* 72). The empty white of the page, like *differánce*, allows each letter to be different, to appear at different times and in different places, and to actually signify or create meaning through the play of this difference between one line stroke and another. Its very signification is dependent upon absence, for “without interruption—between letters, words, sentences, books—no signification could be awakened” (*Writing* 71). This relationship to absence extends to all levels of writing and to all levels of reality. Letters, then, reflect what is true of all existence: the empty and unknown are requisite to open the play of signification.

Foer's work and the theory of language expounded in it likewise embrace Nietzsche's conclusions on truth and metaphor, but descend from the deconstructive paradigm in which absence is the non-centered center. In *Everything is Illuminated*, Foer emphasizes the necessity of absence for signification in the narrative of Brod. Brod's story is part of an imagined history written by the fictional Jonathan Safran Foer and runs parallel to fictional Foer's failed attempt to find his true ancestry. This fictional history of Brod's life can in many ways be read as a morality tale for the necessity of absence as she develops from an isolated orphan seemingly void of things to love into a loving and loved wife with a family. Brod's lonely early life is plagued by an inability to perceive the presence of absence and its value. This period is most repeatedly defined by her inability to love the world or anything in it: “She addressed her world honestly, searching for something deserving of the volumes of love she knew she had within her, but to each she would have to say, *I don't love you*” (79-80). She is unable to love because she



perceives the world only in its presence: “Nothing felt like anything more than what it actually was. Everything was just a thing, mired completely in its thingness” (80). Trapped within in its “thingness,” the world merely is. She believes love is to love the object in its full and present Being; it is to overcome distance and obtain the thing-itself with her affection. Yet, if anything, love is not to obtain an object of affection, rather love is to give an object new and unique meaning. The utter thingness of the world leaves no room for this love as meaning to emerge through play. The problem for Brod, then, is the utter unyielding presence of the world; without seeing that love is meaning and love needs absence to grow, her love is trapped.

Brod is only able to recognize love when she finally sees the place and necessity of absence. When she and her husband are forced to sleep in separate rooms due a head injury that subjects her husband to uncontrollable bouts of violence, they learn to make love through a small hole in the wall that divides their two rooms. Every night they strive to be with one another and make love through this tiny absence in the wall that necessarily divides them, and through this tiny hole Brod realizes the role of absence in life: “They lived with the hole. The absence that defined it became a presence that defined them. Life was a small negative space cut out of the eternal solidity, and for the first time, it felt precious” (135). In this moment, life becomes “precious” and love becomes possible because of absence. The distance, the emptiness, and the *work* to overcome it finally open the space for the play of signification necessary to give meaning to both her life and to her husband in the form of love. Just as the letter requires the blank page to signify, the world requires the presence of absence, the distance between the subject and the thing, in order to signify, to mean, to be anything more than merely a series of things. It is this distance that opens play and allows the work requisite for Brod to say this object

means this and that object means that, and this world means something more than the sum total of its parts.

For most of the characters in Foer's novels, absence does not simply allow them to work, but compels them to do so. Unlike Brod, most of the characters are radically aware of an absence or emptiness that surrounds them, and are compelled to try to fill it. As one of the citizens of the fictional *shtetl* in which Brod lives writes in the synagogue's *The Book of Recurrent Dreams*, "It was not the feeling of completeness that I so needed, but the feeling of not being empty" (37). So it is with many of the central characters, such as Oskar's grandmother and his grandfather, Thomas. Their stories tell of their work to diminish the emptiness that threatens to consume them, and thereby create meaning out of nothing.

It is this emptiness, an absence left by the loss of her family and life in the bombing of Dresden, that compels the grandmother in *EL&IC* to have a child. Absence is a presence that defines the grandmother's life. "My life story was spaces," she writes (176). She needs new love, and by implication new meaning, in order to bridge this gap between herself and life; so she decides to have a child. She explains, "One morning I awoke and understood the hole in the middle of me. . . . It was not out of weakness that I made it happen, but it was not out of strength either. It was out of need. I needed a child" (177). Although she says little about the child who grows to be Oskar's father, it becomes clear that the life she created made it possible for her to get through the years. It gave her something meaningful in the face of nothing. And when this child passes away, she looks at his child, her grandson, and realizes, "When I looked at you, my life made sense. Even the bad things made sense. They were necessary to make you possible" (232). Through the creation of life and love she creates a meaning that spans the spaces and the

longing to make it bearable. The absence, pain, and emptiness are not erased or filled, but through meaning are made livable.

Whether the characters create by flesh or word or some interaction of the two, absence compels them to create meaning out of nothing. It is the emptiness left by his loss in Dresden and his inability to speak that compels the grandfather in *EL&IC* to write, to fill book after book after book with writing that always leaves him with more and more to say. He writes:

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. But there's too much to express. I'm sorry. (132)

Thomas is searching for some way to fill the absence by defining it, by finding a meaning that will turn nothing into something. Yet, the absence cannot be filled, so he writes and writes and writes.

Within theory, it is the trace upon a similar absence that demands all work, while also never letting it end. As Derrida writes, "Only *pure absence*—not the absence of this or that, but the absence of everything in which all presence is announced—can *inspire*, in other words, can *work*, and then make one work" (*Writing* 8). Only pure absence liberates the movement of the trace, which opens the very possibility of signification through marking the difference between the appearing and the appeared. It is this trace between the futural and the always-already gone that marks absence and compels one to work to fill it, to long for something rather than nothing. Yet as such, the trace also signifies the perpetual absence of the promise or origin that it compels one to seek: "The trace is not only the disappearance of origin . . . it means that the origin did not

even disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a nonorigin, the trace, which thus becomes the origin of the origin” (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 61). As the mark of an origin that never truly was or is, the trace within absence compels the characters in Foer’s work to seek after meaning in the void. It frees them to seek after the promise of something more, but also condemns them to perpetually seek and work within emptiness. Therefore, the grandmother’s loss is not erased through the creation of life or the constant work of loving those she created. Nor is the grandfather’s loss ever filled with enough words. He writes, “I want an infinitely long blank book and the rest of time,” before fading off into pages so dense with words they turn black (279).

Yet, due to this absence, the grandmother, Thomas, and other characters in Foer’s works are able to create meaning and construct complex webs of signification, meaning, and love to cast over the void. These webs in no way fill the emptiness, but they do make it bearable. The grandmother finds purpose in the love of her child and grandchild. The grandfather eventually buries the endless letters that emptiness compelled him to write in the empty coffin of his dead son, giving meaning to that loss and putting to rest another. It is the same for other characters. In *Everything is Illuminated*, the fictional Jonathan Safran Foer travels to the Ukraine in search of his lost ancestry. When he is unable to find this origin, he creates his own imagined history of his lost ancestors. Although it does not give him the knowledge of his past he wanted, it builds a net of meaning over the glaring absence and allows him to find structure, no matter how tenuous, within loss. In *EL&IC*, Oskar is haunted by the gaping absence left by his father’s tragic death in the 9/11 bombings of the World Trade Center. He spends the novel traveling around New York City in search of the key-hole that matches a key he found hidden among his father’s things, in hope that the key-hole will give him some secret and foundational knowledge of his father.

Although he never discovers the answer to any secret that might give him back his father, through the work of searching he is able to construct a web of friends, stories, and meaning that make the absence tolerable. The words and acts of each of these characters are, in the end, not enough to erase loss, but through the work of creation, through the give and take of word and flesh, through the play of metaphor, they are able to construct webs of meaning strong enough to get them from one day to the next.

### Writing as Redemption

By centering these creative acts over absence, the theory of language as metaphor in Foer's work gives the act of creating meaning a redemptive possibility and promise. It undermines the fallacy that language represents the world itself or any transcendental meaning, while affirming the promise that out of absence, longing, and need it is possible to create meaning, and through meaning, to live. Foer illustrates again and again that between the too warm flesh of daily experience and the cold concept of the word man can create. And, as the grandfather writes, though "it hasn't made life wonderful, it's made life possible" (17). And it is out of this redemptive possibility, I will argue, that literature, as a creative act, becomes a form of *contemporary* scripture.

Within his so-called flashy "pyrotechnics" and the "postmodern tricks," Foer manages to embrace the philosophical conclusions of the postmodern project—the deconstruction of truth, the elevation of absence, the restructuring of language—and turn absence into a means of redemption, a means to finding meaning and structure within even the most tragic, harrowing, and deconstructing of experiences. He transforms the indeterminacy Nietzsche created when he proclaimed, "What then is truth? A movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and; anthropomorphisms," into a way for man to redeem himself by embracing the metaphors,

metonymies, and anthropomorphisms, and as Foer writes, “willfully creating and believing fictions necessary to life” (*Everything* 83). With only the experience of flesh for ground and the word for tool, Foer illustrates, that humans can and must build a net of meaning over the void—a net that, perhaps if one works diligently enough, can get him or her through the day.

Yet, Foer also illustrates that this meaning is never easy nor predetermined. The creation of meaning is a constant struggle to assert one form against another, to assert one thing in particular against both emptiness and infinitude, which is to say against nothing. As Derrida argues, “The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely” (*Writing* 280). This infinite play of signification does not imply infinite indefinable meaning, which is the same as saying there is no meaning. Rather, it implies that the possibility of meaning is infinitely open, but that humans must work to bring it forth and hold it steady.

It is in this context meaning as work that the implications of Foer’s theory of meaning for literature and literary criticism are most evident, for literature is a concrete way of doing this work. The term “literature” does not indicate an attribute inherent to the writing itself, or one form of writing as opposed to another. Rather, literature is defined only by the intent of both the reader and the author to give meaning to experience or reality through and within the written word. When read or written with this intent, writing becomes a concrete way of searching and building within absence. And, as Derrida argues and Foer shows, writing is not only compelled by absence, by something already gone, but absence is its very breath. In its form, the white page opens the possibility of meaning by allowing the play of difference, deferment, and the trace to be made manifest against emptiness.

In content, literature is also predicated upon absence, for it is compelled by the same trace that forces Foer's characters to create. As Derrida explains, the idea of *the book*, synonymous with the concept of literature, is "to have given us to believe that passion, having originally been impassioned by *something*, could in the end be appeased by the return of that something" (Derrida, *Writing* 295). Just as absence compels Foer's characters to work, it is this hope within absence that compels the writer to put language at risk in search of an answer, in search of something always about to come but already lost. Literature, as a way of capturing the results of this search, then, captures the truth that out of that space between word and flesh, concept and experience—that gap "which we necessarily misconstrue, and which exceeds the alternative of presence and absence"—one can still create small places of rest and respite through the creation of meaning ("*Différance*" 156). This is implicit in Foer's work and it is from this relationship between literature and the trace implied in Foer's work that I argue that literature is a form of *contemporary* scripture, for the trace is synonymous with the name of God.

Traditionally, the name of God has most often been used as a foundation, an origin to put to rest the indeterminacy and chaos of the unknown. What firmer foundation than the omniscience, and omnipresence of an infinite Being to ward off the undecidability and insecurity of standing above the void. Yet, Derrida liberated "God" and all his synonyms from this position by declaring, "Whether he is Being or the master of beings, God himself is, and appears as what he is, within difference, that is to say, as difference and within dissimulation" (*Writing* 74). By replacing all origins and foundations with absence, Derrida dismantled the Western Judeo-Christian assumption that God is an origin that can put to rest indeterminacy and illustrated that the passion for God, like the passion of writing, is a passion for "an origin by means of which nothing has begun" (295). It is a passion for the trace.

The name of God, however, never has been and never will be just one name among many. His name marks the promise of a better past already lost and a brighter future always about to come. It marks the promise of that which we long for most: truth, justice, mercy, redemption. It also marks the call of something wholly other and beyond, something futural and unknown. And most importantly, it marks the promise of something impossible in the face of nothing. Literature, as a passion for the trace, is also a passion for this God.

In his study of Derrida, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (1997), John D. Caputo further enlightens this God of the trace. He writes, “Cast in a deconstructive slant, God is not the possible but the impossible, not the eternal but the futural. To call upon God, to call God’s name, to pray and weep and have a passion for God, is to call for the *tout autre*, for something that breaks up the ho-hum homogeneity of the same and all but knocks us dead” (113). Freed from the use of man, the name of God remains as a question, as a name for that present absence that disturbs every answer, haunts every action, disrupts every judgment, and compels one to work. As “the question disturbing every answer, the question of all questions, the question one asks oneself day and night,” the name of God never lets one rest (Caputo, *Deconstruction* 173). It is the mark of an absence that forces one to admit her vulnerability as she treads across the barren desert of *différance*. It constantly exposes one to the work of deconstruction while leading her forward with the promise of the impossible. In the face of absence, the name of God remains a sign of a lost origin and a futural promise of something wholly other always about to come.

The God of the trace, then, marks the question that forces us to confront the absence upon which we precariously exist, and literature is the weak and tremulous net we use to span the abyss and respond. As scripture wanders through and responds to the question of God, so does



all literature respond to the call of the trace marked by the name of God. As Foer's works illustrate, we cannot escape absence, and the trace within this absence calls us to work. Therefore, we create fictions because we must, we believe in truths for what else are we to do, and we write because we must make it through the day. In the end, these all fulfill the purpose of scripture by providing reassurance and relief in the face of the unknown—a means of redemption from nothing through the creation of meaning.

### A New Criticism

From these implications of Foer's fictive illustrations arises the alternative path for literary criticism out of the conclusions of deconstruction. Foer's theory of metaphor illustrates that meaning is created through the metaphorical interaction of both physical and linguistic reality through the subjectivity of the individual. Neither word nor flesh is subject to the rule of the other, as they both interact to create meaning from the space between them. The creation of meaning by the individual, then, truly is work—a redemptive act of play to overcome the absence, longing, and need that define human experience. Literature as a form of contemporary scripture maintains a privileged position within this work. Literary criticism, as the study of this literature, also partakes in this work. It is subject to the same vulnerability and undecidability, and maintains the same promise of offering a net over the void. In this way, literary criticism equally participates in the act of "willfully creating and believing fictions necessary to life," in many ways collapsing the very distinction between literature and literary criticism.

Historically, literary criticism has paralleled the work of theology and scriptural exegesis. Most Western Judeo-Christian traditions believe scripture to be an intermediary between God, and the study of scripture to be a means to studying God, communicating with God, and approaching God through the text. This is most notable in the Christian and Jewish exegetical

traditions, which have very different views of what language is and how it functions, but both maintain a belief in scripture as man's connection to God. Similarly, literature is an intermediary between man and the postmodern God of deconstruction; it is a reaching hand extended across emptiness towards the promise of the trace. Literary criticism, as the study of this scripture, is a means of studying and approaching the question of God through yet another text. Although not explicitly about God, criticism works to structure a text by giving it one meaning among many, in order to better, more firmly answer the question in His name. Therefore, literary criticism, like Western theology, is a work of belief.

For this reason, I argue, taking my cue from Derrida and Foer, for a new criticism that affirms play and acknowledges the work of belief inherent in the work of interpretation. I am not arguing for a new *form* of criticism, but rather a new *opening* within contemporary criticism that finds coherence in the belief and subjectivity of the critic, rather than the cultural context of the text. This opening would be built on the constant awareness that there is no sure center upon which to rest from the work of interpretation. Yet it would also recognize that the work of criticism can never be an objective science alone, for it is also an act of faith. Criticism, like literature, is a response to the call of the futural, the impossible, the haunting question marked by the name of God. It does not escape the desire for structure and the passion for the trace that is the impetus of both writing and criticism, but it must recognize the nature of the work it performs.

A new form of criticism drawn from Foer would embrace the nature and necessity of belief identified in Foer's works. In *Everything is Illuminated*, Foer writes of a dead man's body turned into a bronze statue and placed in the middle of a village square as a sun dial. As the man lived a life of luck, the statue soon becomes a symbol of luck for the entire village. The people of

the village daily touch the statue with their prayers and wishes in order to obtain a portion of this luck. The statue is touched so frequently that it must be re-bronzed monthly. As the statue becomes more distorted with each re-bronzing, the statue becomes “a changing god, destroyed and recreated by his believers, destroyed and recreated by their belief” (140). As Foer describes:

Those who prayed came to believe less and less in the god of their creation and more and more in their belief. The unmarried women kissed the Dial’s battered lips, although they were not faithful to their god, but to the kiss: they were kissing themselves. And when the bridegrooms knelt, it was not the god they believed in, it was the kneel; not the god’s bronzed knees, but their own bruised ones. (140)

So it is with criticism. Literature is a changing god, destroyed and recreated by critics, for interpretation has little to do with the truth or meaning of the text and everything to do with the critic’s need to believe in one thing or another. Out of the text the critic builds another net of meaning, another fragile response to the haunting of the trace that provides a small protection against the unknown. The new criticism I suggest would embrace this truth and acknowledge what Caputo offers when he writes, “One must, one has to, it is necessary to believe, because . . . one does not know what else to do” (312). Such criticism would be a truly subjective interpretation of texts, in which critics and readers, like authors, would be able to say through the text of another, I believe this and not that. It would be a work of hope and a work of redemption—a work to save ourselves through “play.” It is this work promised within the writings of Jonathan Safran Foer.

#### Conclusion: The Possibility of Redemption

In the Autumn 2007 issue of *The American Scholar*, Melvin Jules Bukiet added another searing review of Jonathan Safran Foer and his similarly young contemporaries to the already

impressive pile. The article, entitled “Wonder Bread,” describes the work of these young writers as Brooklyn Books of Wonder (BBoW): “Take mawkish self-indulgence, add a heavy dollop of creamy nostalgia, season with magic realism, stir in a complacency of faith, and you’ve got wondrousness” (par. 4). His primary criticism of these works is the sentimental way in which the books redeem the most harrowing and painful of experiences, such as 9/11, through self-revelation and emotional insight. “Like many YA novels,” Bukiet writes, “which are constructed for a pedagogical market, the BBoWs insist on finding a therapeutic lesson in their dark material” (par. 8). Perhaps Bukiet’s allegations of self-indulgence, nostalgia, and sentimentality are accurate. I am inclined to admit he has a point. However, like both critics and advocates of Foer, Bukiet reads and judges these works within a previously held notion of what literature is and should be. For Bukiet, it seems, literature should reflect reality; it should reveal the harsh, painful and tragic events of life to be just that and nothing more, never making the move to faith or future. Bukiet ends his article:

In fact, trauma’s never overcome. That’s what defines it. Your father is dead, or your mother, and so are most of the Jews of Europe, and the World Trade Center’s gone, and racism prevails, and sex murders occur. What is, is. The real is the true, and anything that suggests otherwise, no matter how artfully constructed, is a violation of human experience. (par. 51)

Foer’s works, however, seem to operate within a different understanding of literature and its purpose—an understanding that embraces the possibility of individual redemption and the creation of meaning as an act of faith.

Foer and the other authors of BBoWs readily admit that the horrific and the tragic happen, but they then ask, What else? They each seem to answer in unison with Foer: when

confronted with pain, loss and absence we create—not only authors and artists, but everyone.

This message is perfectly captured in the message of a great Hasidic master quoted by Elie

Wiesel: “There is no alternative: one must impose a meaning on what perhaps has none and draw

ecstasy from nameless, faceless pain” (35-36). The creation of meaning is an act of survival and

an act of faith, despite the factuality of trauma and pain. The truth of the tragic is not erased by

these acts of redemption, but we all must have some way to go forward in the night—even the

critic.

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