

Exile and Return:
An Interpretation of
Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close
and
The History of Love
in the Context of Recurrent Themes
in the Jewish Tradition

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Abstract

This thesis sets out to interpret Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and Nicole Krauss' *The History of Love* in the context of recurrent themes in the Jewish tradition. Some of the motifs that can be identified have a biblical origin, which is the case with the paramount images *exile and return* that have provided me with the title of my thesis. However, the analysis is not restricted to detecting religious connotations, as I aim to see how the novels relate to Jewish culture at large, including the history of the Jewish people and the corpus of Jewish-American literature. An underlying question is how Foer and Krauss can be said to represent a new trend within Jewish-American literature. How is Jewishness retained or recreated in the novels?

A second objective of the thesis is to explore to what extent the novels' representation of loss and exile and the hope for a return to a coherent world can be juxtaposed with psychological theory, more specifically trauma theory. Can the experience of loss that the novels focus on be likened to post-traumatic stress disorder, and can the roads to return described be compared to the stages of psychological recovery?

Whereas the first chapter delves into the feeling of exile, the final chapter examines the possibilities for return. The chapter in between revolves around the importance of text in Jewish culture and the ambiguous message the books present on the significance of language, as both causing the feeling of exile and providing the tools for breaking its spell. The overall hypothesis is that a combination of the exile and return metaphors provides the most useful framework for interpreting the novels.

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The Universal Jew

He is a specialist in alienation (the one international banking system the Jews actually control)... Out of their recent sufferings one may expect Jewish writers to make certain inevitable moral discoveries. These discoveries, enough to indict the world, may also be crucial to its salvation. (Rosenfeld 36)

Judaism has always comprised a tension between universalism and particularism. Are the teachings of Judaism and the Jewish God for Jews only, after all, the Jews are God's chosen people, or does Judaism contain moral laws and philosophical wisdom relevant to everyone? The Genesis does, in fact, describe the origin of mankind and God as the almighty creator of it, not of Jews solely? Is God's intervention in history to be seen as divine acts designed to protect the Jews, or are such stories to be seen as exemplary, bringing a message to all humanity about the prize for transgressing God's boundaries and his infinite grace and compassion?

In 1995 Feldheim Publishers released a book by Yosef Ben Shlomo Hakohen called *The Universal Jew* with the subheading *Letters to a Progressive Father from his Orthodox Son*. That the book explores the tension between a particularistic and universal outlook on Judaism should be evident from the title itself. The father fears his son will be lost to the orthodox belief of Jews as God's chosen people and rigorous adherence to religion. However, Hakohen is more concerned with universality than exclusiveness, and Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch's statement that "Judaism, if properly understood and properly presented, unites all living things with a bond of love and justice" (Schwartz), inspires Hakohen. Exploring old, rabbinic stories with his father, Hakohen discovers that the "Jewish story" is the "human story".

Going far in asserting there is a universal message in Judaism has often stirred reactions, e.g. Bernard Malamud's claim that "every man is a Jew though he may not know it" is quite controversial (Kidron 30), as some believe this wide definition makes it meaningless to talk about Jewishness at all. According to Philippe Codde, what Malamud wanted to foreground was how the Jewish story can serve as a metaphor for life itself, which, I may add, is also Hakohen's main point in *The Universal Jew*:

For, Malamud really refers to the general human capacity for suffering, which he identifies with the Jewish identity (not altogether surprising in the light of Jewish history). It rehearses, in short, the existentialist notion that, any day, one can become a sufferer; that any day, one can see the bottom drop out of one's existence. (Codde 172)

In a similar vein, the novelist Daniel Stern lends the following insight to his protagonist in *After the War* (1965), Richard Stone: “Death is Jewish, I thought; or, at least at the moment of death all men are Jews, all men, then, know what it is to be outcast, rejected; the dying man is the ultimate stranger” (181).

These ponderings on the universality of Jewishness can serve as an introduction to my particular project, namely to study two novels by two young Jewish-American authors in the context of Jewish themes. I am not primarily interested in revealing the universal moral message in Judaism itself, rather I want to focus on how the Jewish narrative, its stories of homelessness and abandonment, of guilt, longing and hope, of seeking truth and faltering, of forgetting and remembering, is applicable to the human condition as such. In other words, there are motifs and themes in the Jewish tradition that have a universal appeal, though the adjective *Jewish* implies something that is particular to one group of people only. When Jewish-American literature became mainstream in the post-war years, it was due to its shift of focus from a discussion of the difficulties of assimilation to basic questions about human dignity and choice, the latter trend much inspired by French existentialism, according to Codde. One may even say that the figure of the Jew epitomises certain states of mind that are said to be typical of the modern man. As indicated by the initial Rosenfeld quote, Jews can be seen as “experts” on alienation, which makes it all the more interesting to delve into Jewish experience. Somehow the Jewish position, the people’s historically exposed lives on the outskirts of society, makes the Jewish author particularly fit to describe the sentiments of modern man and his faltering faith in overarching structures such as religion, community and family.

As a result of the postwar mood of disillusion and the retreat of the liberals (who formed, after all, the only camp of Jewish intellectuals), there appeared the novel of alienation – the existentialist, victim novel... For a time it seemed that it was the Jew who, in his being and historical misfortunes, prefigured the fate of Western man himself. The Jewish-American novel thus entered the mainstream of Western world literature. (Sherman 29-30)

What had long been acknowledged by the Jew, that any security is feeble, that misfortunes happen more often than not and that the inner sense of cohesion and meaning may easily be shattered; these were views that the Western man could tap into after the devastation of the Second World War. This helps explain the success of writers like Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud and Philip Roth in the post-war years. As will be made apparent in the exploration of Krauss’ and Foer’s novels, these young, Jewish-American authors are much indebted to their predecessors of the Jewish Renaissance in the 1950s and 60s, who gave the Jewish-American novel its existential twist.

Nicole Krauss (born 1974) and Jonathan Safran Foer (born 1977) have both written two novels, they share an interest in the American sculptor and artist Joseph Cornell and more importantly, for them at least, they are married and have a son together. What is more relevant in the context of my thesis, though, are the many similarities between their second novels, which are coincidental, according to the authors. These novels seem preoccupied with the experience of loss, a theme which has often been treated in Jewish-American fiction both before and after the Holocaust. Moreover, the novels display a certain playfulness with regard to language that of course is not exclusive to Jewish authors, but even so, it is a prominent feature of much Jewish-American literature. It is a playfulness fuelled by a more serious questioning of the possibilities of communicating through language. How do linguistic signs relate to reality? Is there a language for the unspeakable? Finally, the novels seem driven by an underlying quest for truth, a longing for a return to some kind of home. The motif of an unattainable but much desired home often appears in Jewish-American fiction. It is perhaps such a paramount motif due to the people's collective memory of expulsion from the Promised Land, and though the story of Exodus' religious connotations may have waned, the mythological import remains intact. There is duality in the image of return; not only is it a central theme in the novels under study, one may also see the authors' interest in Jewish themes, such as the return motif, as a sign of a return to Jewishness, either consciously or unconsciously. Whereas first generation Jewish immigrants were eager just to become American and second generation immigrants attained that American identity, by the third generation, an American identity was no longer an issue. Consequently, what can sometimes be seen in contemporary Jewish fiction is a renewed interest in the world of the grandparents. Interestingly, old people play major roles in both Krauss' and Foer's books.

Krauss' grandparents come from places in Eastern Europe that no longer exist, and Jonathan Safran Foer has a similar family history. The hometown of his grandfather, Trachimbrod, was obliterated during the Second World War, a story vividly told in Foer's first novel *Everything is Illuminated*. The book was Foer's debut novel in 2002 and was well received by both readers and critics. *Everything is Illuminated* has a composite structure; it contains a blend of different voices, that of the slightly self-important protagonist Jonathan Safran Foer and that of his good-natured guide and translator Alexander, whose grip on the English language leaves something to be desired. This mixing of voices is a technique Foer makes use of in his second novel, too, and it is a feature of much Jewish-American fiction. According to Victoria Aarons, the juxtaposition of different first-person narrations is characteristically Jewish: "And typically we find in these stories of the American Jew's search

for identity a mingling of voices, a collaborative, whether antagonistic or cooperative, combining of narrative voices” (61). The plot of *Everything is Illuminated* revolves around the character Jonathan Safran Foer’s search for his roots in Ukraine, more specifically he goes on a search to find his grandfather’s hometown Trachimbrod and a woman called Augustine, who he has been told saved his father from the Nazis during the war. To help him on his quest he engages *Heritage Tours* run by three generations of eccentric Ukrainians. The past plays the main part in this novel, since it is a book about Jonathan’s search for his roots and thereby his identity. Parallel to his search runs the storyline of his translator Alexander’s uncovering of *his* past. The book reflects upon the importance of memories and the effect of the past on the present, how our lives are illuminated by the past.

Memory, or the lack of it, is also at the heart of Nicole Krauss’s first novel, *Man Walks into a Room* from 2002. The book tells the story of English professor Samson Greene who is found wandering in the desert in a totally confused state, which, it later turns out, is caused by a brain tumor. When the tumor is removed, so is twenty-four years of Samson’s memory, and he returns to his wife without remembering what made him marry her or which stories bind them together. In a very manifest manner the novel illustrates how our lives are based on our memories, and being robbed of our past entails losing our identity and perhaps even our humanity, a fate Jews have long resisted through their insistence on preserving memories.

It is tempting to view Krauss’ and Foer’s focus on memory in the light of Jewish tradition. Memory as a theme also crops up in their second novels. Krauss has even dedicated her second novel *The History of Love* to her grandparents “who taught me the opposite of disappearing”. Part of the plot of *The History of Love* is in fact inspired by something experienced by Krauss’ paternal grandmother, Sasha Mereminski; it may be noted that her surname is similar to Alma’s (i.e. the old Alma) in the book. Like the fictional Alma and her steadfast admirer Leo, Sasha came from Slonim, but had to leave during the war. Sasha Mereminski’s winding road to America and some unanswered letters from a doctor who helped Sasha escape obviously set Nicole Krauss’ imagination going, and traces of the real-life story can be seen in the book about Leo’s constant yearning for Alma, who was lost for him during the war. The following quote is taken from an interview with Krauss by Ann Marsh in *Stanford Magazine* in 2005:

“She ended up in a transit camp in Poland, where she met a doctor. He helped her to get her papers to go out as a chaperone on the last Kindertransport to London. Her parents died. We really don’t know how. She assumed he (the doctor) had died, too. Years later (after Krauss’s

grandmother had married and moved to the United States), she got letters from him in South America.”

Her grandmother never responded to those letters from the doctor, choosing not to complicate her devotion to her new family.

However Jewish the insistence on remembering the past might appear, these authors do not want their books labelled Jewish literature. They are in good company. “The most celebrated author of the twentieth century, Bellow, objected during the first part of his career to being designated a Jewish writer, but it was he who demonstrated how a Jewish voice could speak for an integrated America” (Wisse 205). In fact, scholars have struggled to define Jewish-American literature. Though the label is regularly used, it is not entirely clear what it implies. This issue is touched upon in Codde’s introduction to *The Jewish American Novel*. The following questions can illustrate what makes it hard to agree upon a definition: Is it a Jewish-American novel if it is a book written by a Jew, but not treating Jewish issues, and what is a Jewish issue? Is it a Jewish-American novel if it is written by a Gentile but treating Jewish issues such as the Holocaust? (Codde 7). The reluctance among Jewish-American authors to be called just that adds to the problem of finding a workable definition: “How does one define the Jewish American novel or novelist when even its major representatives – Bellow, Malamud, and Roth – all objected to the appellation, rather considering themselves US-American novelists who happened to be Jews?” (Codde 6). Codde seems to favour a definition provided by Leslie Field:

Someone who has Jewish forefathers and whose writing seems to be immersed in something called the Jewish heritage or Judaism or the special burden of the Jewish history, and who is living in the United States – this someone is a Jewish-American writer, whether our Bellows, Roths, and Malamuds accept the label or not. (Field 103)

Not only have many writers with Jewish forefathers been unwilling to embrace the *Jewish writer* label, the relevance of the whole category Jewish-American literature has been disputed, especially since the 1970s and onwards. Ironically, it was, in a sense, the success of Jewish-American literature in the 50s and 60s that brought about the disintegration. Writers of the Jewish Renaissance like Bellow and Malamud gained success and broadened their literary circle because they moved beyond specifically Jewish issues and wrote stories with a universal appeal, but in doing so, by moving towards the mainstream, some claim the particularly Jewish flavour was lost.

A similar movement towards the mainstream could be detected in the socioeconomic arena as well. The social mobility and economic success of American Jews in general have made them “white”; they are part of the power structure. In the climate of multicultural

studies originating in the 70s, multiculturalism applies to oppressed minorities, a position American Jews can no longer claim. In the introduction to *Contemporary Jewish American Writers and the Multicultural Dilemma*, Andrew Furman discusses the waning interest in Jewish-American literature, which results from “the assumption that Jews in America – unlike African Americans and other minorities currently considered ‘people of color’ – have simply not suffered enough of late to be considered a minority or multicultural group” (5). Not considered interesting objects for multicultural studies, Jewish-American literature has been exiled to “a near invisible territory of literary limbo between the mainstream and the multicultural realm of literary discourse” (Furman 4). Needless to say, Furman, who is himself a scholar of Jewish-American literature, finds the declaration of the death of Jewish-American literature untimely, and its exclusion from the realm of multicultural discourse wrong.

Jewish culture is still a minority culture and there is a distinct Jewish literary voice. This is even a voice that will perhaps grow stronger, since one now, Hegelian antithesis at work, can spot the aforementioned new trend: Jewish-Americans trying to retrieve the Jewishness their grandparents worked so hard to eliminate. As evidence Furman lists a range of books published in the 90s, whose subtitles speak for themselves: David Klinghoffer’s *The Lord Will Gather Me In: My Journey to Jewish Orthodoxy* (1998), Carol Osborn’s *Return from Exile: One Woman’s Journey Back to Judaism* (1998) and Wendy Shalit’s *A Return to Modesty: Discovering the Lost Virtue* (1999). This renewed interest in Jewish culture is not restricted to personal memoirs, which is the genre the titles above represent. As I have already hinted at, Foer and Krauss can also be seen as representatives of this trend. In other words, Jewish-American fiction still holds sway, but defining it remains a tricky matter. Abandoning elusiveness to settle on a workable definition, I end up, like Codde, favouring the definition by Field, appealing in all its simplicity: a writer with Jewish forefathers, living in the USA is a Jewish-American author. What is problematic with this definition is that an author with a Jewish background may not feel called on or obliged to discuss distinctly Jewish matters in his or her books, or reveal a special Jewish consciousness in the style of writing. Nevertheless, it allows for a recognition of a distinctly Jewish voice in the literature of Jewish-American authors. How “Jewish” their books need be to deserve the distinction Jewish-American literature is obviously a question triggering endless discussions, and is impossible to settle once and for all: “Answers to such questions as ‘What is Jewish literature?’ must be accepted as provisional and dynamic, as constructions that can be pondered and toyed with, but not set in stone” (Quint 26). Accepting the dynamic nature of

the category Jewish-American literature and bearing in mind the different discussions upon the matter, I believe there is some steady ground, at least, in Field's ethnic definition and thus I will lean on it when claiming Krauss and Foer are Jewish-American authors and that their novels, including their second novels, which are the focus of my study, are marked by the Jewish heritage or a Jewish voice, if you like. In the case of Krauss' *The History of Love*, all the major characters are in fact Jewish, which makes the link even stronger. This is not so in Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. Whereas his first novel *Everything is Illuminated* was steeped in Jewish history, the characters in his second novel are not Jewish. As in Krauss' book, though, the terror of World War II looms in the background, and the themes of loss and alienation, which have become almost a trademark of Jewish fiction, permeate both novels. It can be asserted that their books are not centred specifically on questions of Jewish identity, the mixed blessing of assimilation or religious practises. Still, it is my claim that their second novels can be seen as structured by Jewish themes, and as these themes often have a universal appeal, there is not necessarily a conflict between any resistance to the limitations indicated by the category "Jewish-American literature" and the exploration of the Jewish motifs in their writing.

Jewish culture is to a large extent a written culture. Language, the written word, Scripture, the interpretations of Scripture and the interpretations of interpretations are cornerstones in Jewish tradition. In fact, the questioning of existence and the on-going efforts to grasp reality through discussion and writing are seen as ways of making service to God. Jewish exegesis *midrash*, is based on a chain of commentary upon commentary. Thus, one may argue that a special awareness of the written language is characteristic of Jewish culture. The focus on interpretation and commentary in Judaism has actually influenced modern literature studies. According to Shira Wolosky, "the result has been a fertile mutual figuring of classical Jewish hermeneutics and contemporary literary theory in one another" (256). The second chapter of my thesis will therefore be dedicated to a study of language itself as reflected in Jewish consciousness, and as reflected in the themes and characters of the novels and in the narrative techniques employed in the books. Parts of this analysis will be linked to modern literary theory, in particular, I will borrow some philosophical insight and wit from the post-structuralist Jacques Derrida, himself a Jew of a secular kind.

The title of my thesis, *Exile and Return*, provides the framework for the thesis, since Chapter 1 will explore the experience of loss and displacement and Chapter 3 will look at the novels' imagined Promised Land, for a way back home, metaphorically speaking. In an

extensive study of Jewish literature both before and after the Second World War Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi refers to Dan Miron who

identifies central metaphoric clusters that dominate Yiddish and Hebrew fiction around the turn of the century; the one that foregrounds conflagration, banishment, and wandering might be called the “exile” paradigm; its counterpart, based on the exodus from Egypt and the constitution of nationhood and a new legal system, could be called the “exodus” paradigm. (Ezrahi 30)

There is then, a certain precedence for using these two paradigms when studying Jewish literature. The keywords *exile* and *return* carry much of the same meaning as the title of a book on psychology that is going to be used as a reference in this paper, *Trauma and Recovery* by Judith Herman, who, coincidentally, also has a Jewish background. Loss is such a basic experience in Jewish culture through exiles in Egypt and Babylon, through pogroms and the Holocaust, and through alienation in new countries. The feeling of being exiled is more than being away from the homeland; it is the threat of losing identity and the belief in a meaningful order. This mental state is similar to what is experienced by people suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. The trauma has shattered the victim’s sense of security in a fundamental way. Still, victims of trauma do generally have some hope of returning to a life that makes sense, just like exiled Jews have always longed for returning to their homeland, or to something that resembles it. One of the objectives of my thesis is to see whether it is possible to juxtapose the novels’ representations of loss and hope for a return to a coherent world with trauma theory. Since verbalising experiences is a vital aspect of recovery from trauma, some of Herman’s ideas will also be applied in my discussion on the possibilities and limitations of language when it comes to communicating our state of mind, our concept of the world and expanding our knowledge of it. Consequently, my aim is twofold: to study the extent to which the novels *The History of Love* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* are structured by Jewish themes, including the Jewish craving for grasping reality through words, and secondly to apply trauma theory in the discussion of the books’ representations of loss and restoration.

A few comments on the method applied in my study are called for at this point. It should be noted that in my search for recurrent Jewish themes, I try to use different angles, including religious, historical and philosophical perspectives. To exemplify, some of the motifs I identify may have a biblical origin like the motif of the ark. Though the ark is primarily a religious motif, it is at the same time relevant in a historical context insofar as the idea of the covenant and the Jews’ belief in being chosen by God has protected their civilisation through generations. Additionally, the motif gets a new twist if seen from a philosophical perspective. In the climate of disillusionment following World War II many

philosophers declared the death of God and some Jewish thinkers claimed the covenantal God no longer existed. How then to be a Jew if not protected by the belief in the Covenant? The threat and challenge of this position was the basis for existentialism in its Jewish version. All of these perspectives can be used in order to illuminate how the ark motif functions in the books under study. Finally, an extra dimension outside of the Jewish universe is added through the psychological approach, represented by Judith Herman's trauma theory, as the ark can be interpreted as a need for an overarching structure to help restore faith in the community.

As the example above hopefully illustrates, when hunting for Jewishness, biblical motifs automatically come into play, but it is my aim not to restrict my discussion to religious motifs. Jewish themes and motifs have a wider range, and many relate more to the secular than the religious world, which applies to the schlemiel character that will be discussed in Chapter 3. Moreover, in treating *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and *The History of Love* as Jewish-American literature, it is obviously important to see how the novels relate to this tradition. Codde's *The Jewish American Novel* has served as an extremely useful source in this respect. Codde operates with two main categories when analysing major novels of the Jewish Renaissance, "novels of negativity or indifference" and "novels of creation and commitment" (125). The terminology is borrowed from Sartre and Camus whose thoughts greatly inspired Jewish-American writers in the post-war years. The resemblance between these categories and the title of my thesis, exile and return, should, of course, not be overlooked. It is Codde's claim that many Jewish-American post-war novels are indebted to pre-war French existentialism which focused on man's solitary position in a universe void of God, with no *a priori* values. Man is condemned to freedom, to make his choices without moral guidance. It was typical of pre-war existentialism, especially in the form it was given by Camus, that this was seen as an impossible project. Facing an absurd universe, most people will resort to some kind of escape, the drudgery of daily routines, investing hope in religion or philosophy, or suicide. The novels inspired by this pessimistic outlook on human life fall into the category of "negativity or indifference". Bellow's *Dangling Man* is one of many examples. Later novels by Bellow are different in tone, though. In *Henderson the Rain King* (1959) the bleakness is replaced by a more optimistic tone; the protagonist is able to make valid choices, to lead an authentic life, and he chooses community. Thus the shift in Bellow's authorship signals another trend in Jewish-American literature, more inspired by post-war than pre-war French existentialism. The shattering experience of World War II had made even Camus realise that being totally disinterested can easily make people fall victim to totalitarian

ideologies. People must take a stand and act. Camus moved closer to Sartre who had always stressed the importance of humans restoring meaning in a universe devoid of God: “The human community must be reunited among the debris of the fallen City of God” (Camus 103). This renewed interest in communal values produced novels that can be labelled “novels of creation and commitment”. Bernard Malamud’s novels are perhaps the most striking examples of this type of fiction within Jewish-American literature. In Malamud’s world there is despair and there is doubt, but somehow the characters are refined through their suffering: “By means of suffering, Malamud’s secluded characters establish their values and accept responsibility for their fellow human beings” (Codde 161). A Malamudian hero is thrown into a meaningless universe and there is no divine justice. However, the hero or anti-hero is saved, at least spiritually, by his ability to take responsibility for his actions and his belief in human connections.

Time has come to collect the meandering thoughts presented in this introduction before they start forming the delta - to stick to river metaphors - of the more detailed study of different aspects of the novels that I will focus on in the following chapters. Firstly, Jewish-American literature as a label has for a long time been disputed by both scholars and by Jewish-American authors themselves, this in spite of the wide range of books written by Jewish-American authors and the equally wide range of literary criticism on Jewish-American literature. My assumption is that it is still a valid category into which I can fit my study objects, not eschewing the novels’ claim to universality. In fact, this category can even be said to become increasingly relevant as a new generation of Jewish-American authors seem more intent on retrieving Jewishness than the generation before them. The Jewishness in question is more of a cultural kind than a religious kind, though. Consequently, my attempt to frame the novels as Jewish is informed by a cultural approach. I seek to illuminate the novels’ themes through religious, historical and philosophical angles. Moreover, I try to see them in the context of the tradition of Jewish-American literature. Since the dominating metaphors are exile and return, with their implications of loss and healing, I find that additional insight may be gained through a psychological reading, though this latter perspective is not as strictly Jewish as the others. Still, few people have a more ingrained experience of what it means to be traumatised and consumed by incessant longing for restoration and recovery, and these are sentiments shared by the characters encountered in the novels.

My project is clearly aimed at placing the novels in a cultural and historical context, and as such it is a far cry from the pure aesthetic approach of a New Critic or a Russian Formalist. As much as my project may appear to be motivated by a need to impose

interpretive strategies that are not literature-specific on the novels, I intend to stay sensitive to the texts as they appear between their covers, too. And my analysis would certainly have stranded if I was not armed with that indispensable method of close reading. As the delta will start forming on the next page, the thought that should linger in my and the reader's mind is this: *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and *The History of Love* explore a relative closeness to or distance from home; they operate within the utterly Jewish images of exile and return. The characters created are not necessarily doomed to eternal exile or blessed with an all-embracing homecoming. They all seem to wander in that continuum in between. At least, this is a thought I am willing to put to a test.

Chapter 1: In a State of Loss

By the rivers of Babylon
we sat and wept
when we remembered Zion.
There on the poplars
we hung our harps,
for there our captors asked us for songs,
our tormentors demanded songs of joy;
they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
How can we sing the songs of the LORD
while in a foreign land? (Psalm 137, 1-4)

Bereft of connections to their homeland and their past, the Jews have often had reason to sing songs of lamentation. Jewish history is a history of recurrent exiles through which the people have survived by maintaining the hope of a return. After the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 AD, exile became the norm more than an abnormality. Diaspora was the sphere of the Jews, not belonging, not wanted. The Jew was often seen as the scourge of the earth, the pitiful scapegoat, or the obstacle blocking the way to Utopia in the form of Hitler's "Dritte Reich". The road to the peak of anti-Semitism during the Second World War was paved with centuries of prejudice and persecution. This war also represents the peak of Jewish alienation, as all hope of acceptance and belonging in their European substitute homelands was lost.

The novels focused in this thesis use World War II as the backdrop of the narratives. The war and its repercussions loom in the background of the novels and, in fact, in the Jewish consciousness as such. A reference to another book helps illustrate this point. In Philip Roth's novel *Zuckerman Bound* the protagonist's sick mother is about to lose her language due to a swelling brain tumor, but the word *Holocaust* is intact and is what she writes when asked to state her name. This is a very powerful image of how, for a Jew, the Holocaust is encapsulated in the brain like a tumor (Budick 212).

Considering the disastrous effects it is no wonder that World War II has seeped into the common Jewish psyche. However, the remembering of World War II is only the culmination of a long tradition in the Jewish culture, that of internalising history and the experiences of the people. Due to the lack of a geographical homeland, the Jews have cultivated the art of preserving memories and retelling their stories. Thus Jews have a collective memory of the many exiles and the persecutions they have been subject to, which over time has been condensed into an overriding feeling of loss. The repeated threat of annihilation both literally and culturally is so much a part of Jewish history that it has grown

into a common trauma. The sense of deprivation is so pervasive it has become ingrained in the culture itself, so that in a way the Jewish culture has come to epitomise the feeling of loss. Due to the diaspora which spread not only Jews but also their stories and ideas, and, of course, due to the fact that Judaism and Christianity share Holy Scripture, (the Tanakh or the Old Testament), Jewish concepts and images have been adopted by people all over the world. Thus, “Babylonian Captivity” and “Walk in the Desert” are images of loss and bewilderment not only for Jews. What makes the exile image interesting to view from a psychological perspective is that the condition of exile is clearly not limited to the physical lack of a geographical homeland, it transcends the physical; being exiled becomes a mental state, it can render one powerless and shake the very foundations of identity. According to Judith Herman, that is the essence of trauma, it is “an affliction of the powerless” (33). In the following I will explore the exile image in further depth, studying it from different angles through other related Jewish or biblical metaphors and notions such as the myth of the Wandering Jew, the concept of guilt and the story about man’s expulsion from paradise. Along the way, it will also be shown how the novels’ depictions of lost characters tie in with a larger tradition of Jewish-American literature in which meditations upon the relative separateness between man and community are recurrent. It is my aim to see how some of the characters in the two novels can be described within the frame of the exile image and also how the experience of loss is at the heart of trauma. The sense of deprivation it creates involves a loss of identity, footing and adequate means by which to surmount obstacles. If not treated, the trauma will cause “a narrowing of consciousness, a withdrawal from engagement with others, and an impoverished life” (Herman 42). These are dangers faced by many of the characters in Krauss’ and Foer’s novels, and it follows that trauma theory may provide a fruitful angle for analysing their predicaments.

Wandering Jews

On that same day the LORD told Moses, "Go up into the Abarim Range to Mount Nebo in Moab, across from Jericho, and view Canaan, the land I am giving the Israelites as their own possession. There on the mountain that you have climbed you will die and be gathered to your people, just as your brother Aaron died on Mount Hor and was gathered to his people. This is because both of you broke faith with me in the presence of the Israelites at the waters of Meribah Kadesh in the Desert of Zin and because you did not uphold my holiness among the Israelites. Therefore, you will see the land only from a distance; you will not enter the land I am giving to the people of Israel." (Deuteronomy 32, 48-52)

After forty years spent wandering through the desert, the Israelites can cross the Jordan and enter the Promised Land. Their leader Moses is only granted a view of it from a distance. As the weary traveller condemned to exile and denied the return home, Moses can be said to

epitomise the Wandering Jew. The image of the Wandering Jew clearly depicts something that is characteristic of Jewish existence, yet using it is somewhat problematic, since it was long associated with qualities attributed by Christians. The legend of the Wandering Jew does not derive from the Bible or from Jewish culture itself. The legend is a product of Christian hostility towards Jews and illustrates their need for stigmatising the Jews. According to legend, a Jew taunted Jesus on his way to crucifixion asking him go quicker, whereupon Christ answered not to worry about him as he would surely reach his destination, but the Jew was condemned to walk the earth eternally until the second coming. In European folklore this legend evolved into a tale about the curse of immortality; the Wandering Jew was a figure similar to the Flying Dutchman. In spite of the figure's origin in a prejudiced, Christian legend, it makes sense to view him as a paramount Jewish image, since over the years it has been used for purposes of self-interpretation, and as the reference to Deuteronomy shows, there is biblical resonance. The Wandering Jew gradually emerges as the figure that can embody the experience of homelessness, exile, diaspora, of not ever finding one's way back home. He is the man without a state, the citizen of the state of loss. Tresa Grauer explains how Jewish identity can be defined in terms of being ostracised:

The notion of Israel as a sacred homeland to which Jews in diaspora are longing to return is, of course, one of the oldest and most central tenets of Judaism – one that has profoundly shaped the relationship between Jewish identity and the meaning of “home”. ... This lack, the sense of displacement that comes with distance from the homeland of memory, is then equated with Jewishness itself, where Jewish identity is defined as the condition of wandering, alienation, and perpetual deferral of identification with place. (277)

This sense of displacement and loss characterises many of the characters in *The History of Love* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. Leo Gursky, the lonely, old man in *The History of Love* has been wandering ever since his family fell victim to the Nazi extermination in his home village Slonim. Leo lived like an animal in the forest for a long time, hiding from the Nazis. What kept him going was the thought of his girl Alma that he believed he would be reunited with after the war. However, it turns out she has married another man in America, thinking Leo was killed in the war like so many other Jews. This discovery seems to remove Leo's last connection with the world. What kept him sane through the years in hiding is taken away, and losing Alma is more devastating than just losing a girlfriend. He loses faith and his sense of self. The wide impact of the loss can be read from the name of his girlfriend. *Alma* means soul in Spanish (the language in which *The History of Love* was first published), and the Latin *Alma Mater* means bounteous mother, symbolising life as fulfilment and fertility, very unlike the barren inner landscape of Leo Gursky. Interestingly, the Wandering Jew was

often depicted as a man who had lost his soul or sold it to the devil. One author who often used the figure of the Wandering Jew in his stories is Nathaniel Hawthorne, in *Ethan Brand* (1850) the Wandering Jew is the symbol for death of the soul. As a satanic agent he tempts Ethan into “that deforming pride of intellect that has pushed out ‘the heart’, the human fellow feeling, at the price of his soul” (Harap 112). Hawthorne’s image of the Jew is definitely blemished by his personal dislike of the people and the prejudice of his time, but looking beyond that, it is a fascinating aspect of the Wandering Jew that is addressed. He is a figure who knows more about the world and especially its darker truths, than most people, and who consequently is estranged from common human relations. In this sense, Leo, the Wandering Jew in Krauss’ novel, takes on mephisto-like qualities. In doubting life’s basic goodness and refusing to believe mother earth is bountiful and merciful, he becomes a dubious figure on the outskirts of human community. His loss of spirit is perfectly mirrored in his account of how his cousin tried to take his picture with a pinhole camera in 1947, but Leo never emerged on the picture: “Where I should have been there was only a scratchy grayness” (129). The myth about the camera taking a person’s soul is twisted. In Leo’s case the soul is already gone, causing him to recede into invisibility: “I had lost whatever the thing is that makes people indelible” (129).

Leo’s soullessness can be viewed as a result of psychological trauma. According to Judith Herman: “Traumatic events destroy the victim’s fundamental assumptions about the safety of the world, the positive value of the self, and the meaningful order of creation” (52). It is typical that trauma victims find it difficult to negotiate reasonable terms for relations to other people:

Trauma impels people both to withdraw from close relationships and to seek them desperately. The profound disruption in basic trust, the common feeling of shame, guilt, and inferiority, and the need to avoid reminders of the trauma that might be found in social life, all foster withdrawal from close relationships. But the terror of the traumatic event intensifies the need for protective attachments. (Herman 56)

Leo’s life in America is one of alienation and disconnection. His closest friend Bruno turns out to be a figment of his imagination. He was a childhood friend who died in 1941. He lives in utter isolation and has taken pains not to get involved with people. Still, it is vital for him to be noticed, which causes him to do absurd things, such as volunteering to be a nude model for a drawing class. Such attempts at establishing some form of contact is often accompanied by humiliation as when he undresses for the nude act and discovers a smear in his underwear, or when he spills coffee in Starbucks in a desperate attempt to be seen. The diasporic Jew was often subject to ridicule and scorn in Europe. Something about the air of solitude and the lack

of geographic connection aroused suspicion and even anger in people. Similarly, Leo Gursky's frail efforts at reconnecting with the world are often aborted before any links are established. Yet another example of feeble attempts to break the curse of alienation is Leo's visit to a tropical greenhouse in the Botanical Garden: "It was another world inside, wet and warm, like the breath of people making love had been trapped there. With my finger I wrote on the glass LEO GURSKY" (34). He is trying to inscribe his name into the sphere of a truly living, breathing existence, as the fertile and damp greenhouse reminds him of the human warmth and love he is shut out from. There is, however, an insurmountable gap between him and the world he desires. It is almost as if he is mocked by the exuberant greenery.

The greenhouse scene bears resemblance to a similar scene in a novel by Isaac Rosenfeld, *Passage from Home* (1946). The alienated protagonist Bernard goes into a conservatory where he has a sort of epiphany:

I stood flush with the force common to all existence, and again it seemed to threaten me in my right to call my existence my own. For these trees, or palms, or plants – I did not know what to call them – had so much stronger and more ponderous grasp of life than I, that they were rather some huge mineral creation of color and heat, compared with which my life was ailing and cold, and even at its fullest, but a form of death...I could imagine each plant in the glass garden, each stem and twig and flake of bark, unique and complete in itself, yet meaningless and momentary and without true existence; and I felt that this world exerted a threat against me...It lay before me, loomed over me, swarmed around me, oppressive with time. (261-62)

In *The Jewish American Novel* Codde points out how Rosenfeld's description of Bernard is indebted to French existentialism. Bernard seems almost appalled by the in-itself existence of the plants contrasting his desperate search for essence, for some purpose or meaning to embrace it all. Bernard comes to realise the importance of "asserting one's humanity against the all-pervasive in-itself", and "the value of love and community as a guiding principle for one's rebellion against an indifferent, plague-infested universe" (Codde 214). Nevertheless, Bernard's attempt at connecting with people fails. There is an interesting intertextuality between *The History of Love* and *Passage from Home* in the use of the fruitful greenhouse in contrast to the barrenness of the books' protagonists, and more than anything else it illustrates the occupation with alienation in Jewish-American literature. The characters' alienation creates unsettling and discomfiting due to their reluctance or inability to embrace the blessings of community, which is exactly one of the main traits attributed to the Wandering Jew, as has already been pointed out.

Another literary character to whom Leo bears resemblance is Joseph from Saul Bellow's *Dangling Man* (1944), who falls into an existential crisis as his routine life is destroyed when he receives a draft call from the army. In the time lapse created by the

suspension of his draft, he is left dangling, as he discovers the hollowness of his life but is unable to make significant choices of value or take any action against his growing disillusion. Leo's crisis was prompted by much more dramatic events and major, personal losses, but like Joseph he is unable to reaffirm his connectedness to the world, which leaves him in a similar dangling position between the urge to be connected and the rejection of human community. It is this ambiguity, this in-between-position that makes him an outsider, a marginal man, and makes people see him, though this is Leo's own interpretation of hostile looks, as a "cockroach in the brownie mix" (125).

Any shred of hope that Leo might have harboured is lost after learning that his son Isaac is also dead. In her book on trauma, Herman writes: "When trust is lost, traumatized people feel that they belong more to the dead than to the living" (52). Throughout *The History of Love* Leo awaits his death. His life since entering America has been a perpetual punishment. In this respect, he also resembles the Wandering Jew condemned to walk the earth for all eternity, cursed by immortality. Death is not the enemy; the ultimate threat of trauma victims is the loss of self, according to Herman (56). This claim resonates in the following quote from the novel: "I lost the only woman I ever wanted to love. I lost years. I lost books. I lost the house where I was born. And I lost Isaac. So who is to say that somewhere along the way, without my knowing it, I didn't also lose my mind" (269)?

An aspect of Leo's story worth commenting upon is how his losses are connected to his ruined past, just as his childhood shetl Slonim is literally in pieces. For post-war Jews the destroyed villages of Eastern Europe came to symbolise the site of real Judaism, even more than Jerusalem that was restored as Jewish ground in 1948. It is as if there is a need among the people to long for what is definitely lost, just as Leo seems to feed on his memory of a lost childhood and lost love:

For all the centuries of the Diaspora, Jerusalem was entombed as the ruined shrine in the mind, in the poetry, and in the ritual behaviour of Jews. After Jerusalem had been reclaimed, *Judea capta* dusted off and rebuilt, and even the remains of the temple incorporated into the iconography of political space, the Jewish imagination that needed ruins began to turn back to Poland. The small towns and cities, the cemeteries and concentration camps of Eastern Europe have come in the last decade of the twentieth century to replace Jerusalem as the site of pilgrimage to a lost civilization. (Ezrahi 219)

Another wanderer to be encountered is Thomas Schell in Foer's book, whose exile starts with the bombing of his hometown Dresden. He not only lost his family in the bombing, but also his pregnant girlfriend Anna, his creativity, his faith and his speech. He is literally rendered speechless by horror. In one of the many letters he never sends to his son he tries to explain his speechlessness:

To my unborn child; I haven't always been silent, I used to talk and talk and talk, and talk, I couldn't keep my mouth shut, the silence overtook me like cancer [...] it wasn't the bombs and burning buildings, it was me, my thinking, the cancer of never letting go, is ignorance bliss, I don't know, but it is so painful to think (16-17)

This attempt at explaining calls to mind the dying mother in Roth's *Zuckerman Bound* whose internalised memory of the Holocaust appeared as a tumor in the brain. Schell's pathological silence is another example of the preoccupation with loss and trauma often seen in Jewish literature. Like Leo Gursky, Thomas Schell's war experiences have doomed him to an existence on the fringes of society, a position associated with the Wandering Jew. Another similarity between the two wanderers is the etymology of their girlfriends' names. Anna means gracious, the one who gives; in other words, the link to the bounteous world, the way to grace is obstructed with Anna's death. Like Leo, he seems trapped in an ongoing exile. He comes to New York after the war, returns to Dresden and ends up in New York again after his son has died, but neither Dresden nor New York is home, as the state of exile is first and foremost a troubling mental state that travelling cannot cure. Schell easily fits into Herman's description of post-traumatic stress disorder, which is characterised by a feeling of helplessness caused by the victim's incapability of dealing with the disaster. As the trauma is not resolved, it remains trapped in the mind like a disease. In a wider sense and in the frame of the exile paradigm, Schell's internalised terror can symbolise the tendency in Jewish culture and literature for keeping the memory of past atrocities.

Thomas Shell's description of the Dresden bombing is perhaps the most haunting part of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. Walking through the city he sees things for which there is no conceptual framework; how to make sense of senselessness? To quote Judith Herman: "Traumatic events are extraordinary, not because they occur rarely, but rather because they overwhelm the normal adaptations to life" (33). The corruption of humanity that takes place in Dresden is mirrored through the killing of the animals at the Dresden Zoo. A keeper at the zoo whose eyes have been burnt closed asks Thomas to kill the carnivores which have escaped the cages ripped open during the bombing:

I killed an ape that was perched on the stump of a fallen tree, pulling its hair as it observed the destruction, I killed two lions, they were standing side by side facing west, were they related, were they friends, mates, can lions love? I killed a cub that was climbing atop a massive dead bear, was it climbing atop its parent? I killed a camel with twelve bullets, I suspected it wasn't carnivore, but I was killing everything, everything had to be killed... (213)

There is no escaping the situation; Thomas can only take part in the senseless killing that goes on around him by exterminating the animals. When faced with danger, the normal human reaction is to experience an adrenaline rush which makes the person extremely alert, to make

either fight or flight possible. However, sometimes neither option is there, and that is when traumatic reactions occur. When the reactions designed to make self-defence possible can not be put to use, traumatic symptoms start taking on a life of their own. According to Herman, the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder fall into three main categories called *hyper arousal, intrusion and constriction* (35). Hyper arousal is a term that refers to the heightened state of danger awareness that victims of trauma suffer. They are always expecting danger. Intrusion refers to how traumatised people cannot resume their normal lives: “The trauma repeatedly interrupts. It is as if time stops at the moment of trauma (37).” This symptom describes Thomas Shell’s situation well. His life stopped one day in February 1945. Since then he has been unable to form lasting relationships, to fulfil his dream about becoming a sculptor or to embrace life with any form of trust. He is haunted by traumatic memories which leave him unable to break out of his frozen state.

Because traumatic memories are so frightening, victims will often try to suppress them and distance themselves from them. This brings me to the third main category of symptoms typical of post-traumatic stress disorder, *constriction*. When left in a situation where resistance is futile, people can simply surrender and enter a state of numbness. It is a way of escaping overwhelming fear, but the state itself can become a place for which there is no escape; the numbness remains long after the trauma was inflicted. Quoting Herman again, this is how constriction works: “The constrictive symptoms of the traumatic neurosis apply not only to thought, memory, and states of consciousness but also to the entire field of purposeful action and initiative. In an attempt to create some sense of safety and to control their pervasive fear, traumatised people restrict their lives” (46). Thomas Schell’s life is certainly restricted; he enters a marriage to which he cannot be fully committed and he goes back to Dresden when discovering his wife is pregnant. He can not lead a life with consequences and commitments; he is numb, he is a shell of a man, which is also indicated by his surname. And he is the prototype of the wanderer, condemned to walk the earth eternally.

Meanwhile, his grandson feels banished from home after his father died in the World Trade Center on what Oskar has named *the worst day*. The secret of the phone calls his father made on that day, and that Oskar could not answer, is so painful that it exiles him from home. Discovering a mysterious key in a vase in his father’s wardrobe followed by a note saying *Black*, Oskar embarks on a journey through New York in search of the Black to whom the key belongs. The solution to the mystery turns out to be different from what Oskar had expected, as the key opens no door to his father’s life, but it is obviously the search itself that matters. The journey motif in Judaism arises from the banishment or exile, but the wandering takes on

a life of its own and is not only a quest for the return to Jerusalem but a quest for truth, thus wandering equals wondering. Viewed in this light the image of the eternal Jew mirrors the immortality of the Jewish people, who miraculously have survived centuries of persecution, and their never-ending journey, or quest for truth, if you like. Closure is not the goal. In *Booking Passage* Ezrahi comments on the importance of journeys in Jewish literature, in this case in I.B. Singer's fiction: "Bashevis Singer suspends the awful finality of endings fictive or true. At the close of his narrative, Gimpl takes up his staff and goes out into the world, invoking in his wandering the consciousness, the theodicy, and the narrativity of exile" (215). Similarly, Oskar's wandering through the streets of New York does not take him back to his father, but it is something he can do and something that expands his knowledge, if not specifically about his father: "That was kind of how I felt when I decided that I would meet every person in New York with the last name Black. Even if it was relatively insignificant, it was something, and I needed to do something, like sharks, who die if they don't swim, which I know about" (86-86). The wandering or wondering does not, however, remedy Oskar's lost sense of safety. Since 9/11 he is acutely aware of how destruction might hit without a warning. This causes a type of disconnection described by Herman:

Assurances of safety and protection are of the greatest importance. The survivor who is often in terror of being alone craves the simple presence of a sympathetic person. Having once experienced the sense of total isolation, the survivor is intensely aware of the fragility of all human connections in the face of danger. (61-62)

Oskar is obsessed with safety after 9/11. His fear of elevators and public transport is one example; his and his grandmother's routine of constant reassurances, as soon as she says "Oskar", he replies "I'm OK", is a more subtle one. Not finding adequate ways to deal with his loss, Oskar often resorts to giving himself bruises, a well-known strategy in trauma patients, preferring the physical pain to the psychological pain. The self-mutilation is a response to the unbearable feeling of numbness and abandonment that follows terror and grief:

The normal regulation of emotional states is similarly disrupted by traumatic experiences that repeatedly evoke terror, rage, and grief. These emotions ultimately coalesce in a dreadful feeling that psychiatrists call "dysphoria" and patients find almost impossible to describe. It is a state of confusion, agitation, emptiness, and utter aloneness. [...] The mutilation continues until it produces a powerful feeling of calm and relief; physical pain is much preferable to the emotional pain that it replaces. (Herman 108, 109)

On his quest for the missing lock to the key, Oskar meets Mr. A.R. Black, who decides to accompany Oskar in his continued search. Mr. Black has not left his apartment since his wife died twenty-four years ago. So here is yet another character mentally exiled by overwhelming

loss. But there is another aspect of Mr. Black that links him closer to the image of the Wandering Jew. The legend attributed a historical witness role to the Wandering Jew. As he was immortal, he had lived to see centuries pass and had a unique insight into human history. He had been witness to the countless atrocities committed by humans. This special knowledge set him apart and made him a sinister figure, which, together with the idea of soullessness, can account for the Mephistophelean side to him. In Hawthorne's *Ethan Brand*, the German Jew travelling around with his diorama acts as a Mephistopheles or satanic agent to Ethan:

The pictures of scenes and events out of the past seen through the diorama, together with the old Jew's commentaries, suggest one of the conventional marks of the Wandering Jew: his role as universal witness of the past. As he expounds the meaning of the pictures, his hand is seen through the diorama as a "gigantic, brown, hairy hand, - which might have been mistaken for the Hand of Destiny." Ethan Brown looks into the diorama and withdraws in shock at what he sees there: "I remember you know," Ethan Brand mutters. The Jew answers "with a dark smile,..." "I find it to be heavy matter in my shoe-box, - this Unpardonable Sin." (Harap, 112)

Again, seeing past the author's dislike for Jews, his use of the image of the Wandering Jew in the role of historical witness is intriguing. Mr. Black is also a witness. He used to be a war correspondent, and has unique knowledge of countless wars that have taken place in the 20th century. Seeing the effects of war at close hand and admitting his own obsession with recording it, Mr. Black comes to realise war is an everlasting reality. In a conversation with Oskar, he says:

"For most of our marriage I treated her as though she didn't matter! I came only between wars, and left her alone for months at a time. There was always war!" "Did you know that in the last 3,500 years there have been only 230 years of peace throughout the civilized world?" He said, "You tell me which 230 years and I'll believe you!" "I don't know which, but I know it's true." "And where's this civilized world you're referring to?" (161)

To make up for neglecting his wife and nourishing his fascination for war, Mr. Black decided to stop reporting at one point, and as a symbolic act towards his wife, he cut down a tree whose roots she once tripped on, and made it into a bed. This, he tells Oskar, was his last war. However, there is more of a resigned acknowledgement of the supremacy of war than the bliss of domesticity in the answer he gives to Oskar when asked to explain who won the war: "The ax won! It's always that way!" (161). Oskar himself is also a witness to historical atrocities, as the son of a victim of the terror attack on September 11 and as the wanderer of New York who visits people with the surname Black, all marked by the effects of loss, be it loss of health or loss meaning. The character Oskar is obviously intended to allude to another Oskar, Oskar Matzerath in Günter Grass' *The Tin Drum* from 1959, who reports on the cruelty of the Nazi regime while playing on his tin drum. In *Extremely Loud and Incredibly*

Close the tin drum is replaced by a tambourine, but like his namesake Oskar is confronted with devastation; he sees how people are pulled toward destruction.

Similar to Oskar, the loss of a father brings Alma Singer in *The History of Love* on a journey first to find a man for her grief-stricken mother, later to find the truth about her namesake Alma and the identity of the man asking her mother to translate the book *The History of Love*, a quest that is inextricably entwined with Alma's search for identity. As with Oskar's quest, the solution to the mystery turns out to be different than what Alma had expected; the mysterious Jacob Marcus turns out to be Isaac Moritz who is dead, and so is Alma's namesake. It is yet another example of a journey turning into the goal and not the means to an end: "I'd started out looking for someone who could make my mother happy again, now I was looking for something else, too. About the woman I was named after. And about me" (224). Alma's brother, Bird, thinks he might reach his goal and get some closure by going to Israel. Believing he is a *lamed vovnik*, one of the thirty-six righteous people of his generation that can redeem man with God, according to Jewish tradition, he sells lemonade in the street to save money for a plane ticket to Israel. He is sadly disappointed when discovering the price is higher than it was when his mom last went to Israel: "How is anyone supposed to be a lamed vovnik if first it costs 700 dollars to get to Israel and then they change it to 1200 dollars? They should keep the price the same so that people will know how much lemon-aid they have to sell if they want to get to Jerusalem" (324).

His real name, Emmanuel, means *God with you*, and suggests his strong attachment to religion. He earned his nickname Bird when he was six and, believing he could fly, took a leap out of a second-floor window. His response to the exile caused by the loss of his father is escape, through a leap through an open window or through travelling ever further into his mind and the realm of religion, thereby gradually losing his sense of reality. In a desperate attempt to gain a sense of safety and belief in a meaningful order, Bird clings to Judaism, places mezuzahs on every doorframe in his apartment, writes the four Hebrew letters of God's name on everything and plans his trip to the Holy Land. Seeking redemption and perfection through travelling to Israel might not resolve his issues, though. Viewing the case of this little, confused Jew in the light of the greater quest of Jews for a return to the Holy Land, it can be a major illusion to believe life can be restored to a perfect state through the return.

In *Booking Passage* Ezrahi quotes Amnon Raz-Karkotzkin¹ to illustrate the futility of such a belief: "How can we once again feel galut here in Israel, that is recognize that the

¹ Exile within a Sovereign State: A Critique of the "Negated Exile" in Israeli Culture, *Teoria u-vikoret*, no.4 (fall 1993): 34-38

yearning for redemption is itself a form of redemption? *Galut* signifies absence, the acknowledgement of the present as an imperfect time, of the world as a defective place” (Ezrahi 233). Accepting absence and imperfection proves almost impossible for Bird wanting to fly above the meanness of life. Unlike his sister he cannot see the travelling itself as purposeful; he needs the goal. But for Wandering Jews that goal may never be obtained, or to quote Ezrahi: “the most basic, primordial exilic pattern – the topos of the journey to the Holy Land as the tale of the endlessly deferred end” (194). On a psychological level, Bird’s religious delusions and the felt imperativeness of going to Israel can be seen as a misdirected attempt to feel safety and regain control, which is central to traumatised people, according to Herman:

Trauma robs the victim of a sense of power and control; the guiding principle of recovery is to restore power and control to the survivor. The first task of recovery is to establish the survivor’s safety. This task takes precedence over all others, for no other therapeutic work can possibly succeed if safety has not been adequately secured. (159)

Bird never makes it to Israel and the whole enterprise of the planned travel does not give him any sense of control; quite the contrary, it leads to disappointment in a lot of people including the janitor at Hebrew school, Mr. Goldstein. Disappointing him is most disappointing to Bird, causing him to be ever more zealous in his religious devotion and pursuit of control, which eventually makes his journey quite different from the one he first imagined.

For all characters mentioned in the above discussion, the outsider stigma, originating from an experience of loss, has become a conspicuous trait, and in their capacity as outsiders they serve as modern examples of Wandering Jews. Sadly, as much as this image sets them apart and makes them special, it also blocks their way to creating new relations, a fate shared by many Jews throughout history who have discovered that their exclusiveness has made it impossible to seek inclusion:

This historically based sense of the outsider can be viewed as a consolation, a named identity that connects one to a history, a tradition of the “chosen”. It is a myth by which one can reify experience and explain events. The outsider myth provisionally gives these characters an inner gratification, an elevated status of difference and exclusion. But this sense of exclusion too, is an alienating force; it continues to keep these Jews on the periphery of society, if only in their self-conception of their place and participation. (Aarons 147)

As much as the idea of being chosen and thereby inevitably different from other people may have provided alienated Jews with some consolation, additional explanations have been needed when calamities have really struck. The centrality of the guilt concept is the topic of the next section.

Guilt

If in spite of this you still do not listen to me but continue to be hostile toward me, then in my anger I will be hostile toward you, and I myself will punish you for your sins seven times over . . . I will turn your cities into ruins and lay waste your sanctuaries, and I will take no delight in the pleasing aroma of your offerings. I will lay waste the land, so that your enemies who live there will be appalled. I will scatter you among the nations and will draw out my sword and pursue you. Your land will be laid waste, and your cities will lie in ruins . . . As for those of you who are left, I will make their hearts so fearful in the lands of their enemies that the sound of a windblown leaf will put them to flight. They will run as though fleeing from the sword, and they will fall, even though no one is pursuing them.” (Leviticus 26: 28-36)

The strategy of Jews when faced with imminent destruction and experiencing a faltering faith in God’s grace as a result, is to explain devastation by referring to the sinful state of the people. The Jews would not have ended up in Babylon had they not turned to other gods and ignored social injustice. The Second Temple would not have been destroyed were it not for the corruption of faith and the turning away from the sacred covenant. This strategy makes possible the preservation of faith through exile and persecution, but it also fosters guilt. Jewish guilt has become a commonplace conception, and has multiple representations in popular culture, such as the neurotic, urban Jew with a dominating mother in Woody Allen’s films. A more sinister variant of Jewish guilt is the one found in survivors of the Holocaust. The war experiences might have shattered their belief in God, but the feeling of guilt perseveres. The guilt motif runs like an undercurrent in Krauss’ and Foer’s novels, and the feeling runs through the veins of some of the characters. Apart from representing a typical Jewish preoccupation, they also typify something that is seen in many trauma victims, survivor guilt. Replacing the religious and psychological perspectives with philosophical discourse, the guilt motif can be given a slightly different interpretation through existentialist philosophy. Existentialism had a heavy impact on Jewish-American literature in the 50s and 60s, and the universes of Krauss’ and Foer’s fiction in many ways echo the literature of this period. Here are utterly abandoned characters facing overwhelming loss and realising they are condemned to an existence in an absurd universe with no given meaning. According to existentialist thought, it does not follow that man may dispense of morality altogether. On the contrary, it becomes man’s responsibility to create meaning and to admit his moral obligation towards other people. Man is condemned to make choices without divine guidance and is always held accountable for the consequences. This position fosters angst as man realises the enormity of his freedom.

Leo Gursky in *The History of Love* is the only one left from his family. As the Germans approached Slonim in 1941, his mother sent him out into the woods promising the rest of them would follow him later. He asked to at least be allowed to take his 13 year old brother with him, but his mother insisted he should go alone, and that was the last he saw of his family. Survivor guilt is inevitable:

Feelings of guilt are especially severe when the survivor has been a witness to the suffering or death of other people. To be spared oneself, in the knowledge that others have met a worse fate, creates a severe burden of conscience. Survivors of disaster and war are haunted by images of the dying whom they could not rescue. They feel guilty for not risking their lives to save others, or for failing to fulfil the request of a dying person. (Herman 54)

As a Jew who escaped the destruction of his people, Leo represents the typical Holocaust survivor whose life is curtailed by guilt. Nowhere does the Jewish inclination towards guilt become more full-fledged than in those who experienced first-hand how mere coincidences led to *their* rescue and the death of others.

"Survivor guilt" is the term used to describe the feelings of those who, fortunately, emerge from a disaster which mortally engulfs others. On an irrational level, these individuals wince at their privileged escape from death's clutches. From a psychodynamic viewpoint, the Holocaust survivor's guilt may reflect constraints against the expression of rage toward the perpetrators of his misfortune, toward the Nazis and their collaborators, and toward parents who failed to provide protection from those torturous events. Instead of expressing rage outwardly, the survivor turns it upon himself. Guilt is the embodiment of anger directed toward the self. (Hass)

Somehow the existentialist perspective seems most fruitful when discussing Leo Gursky's feelings of guilt. He is a man who seems to have abandoned religious faith a long time ago, but who has encountered extreme situations that have caused what Sartre called "ethical anguish". One could argue Leo was forced to leave his family when his mother told him to go hide in the woods, and that the cruel fate of his family and Leo's survival can only be attributed to mere chance. Still, he could have objected, or he could have insisted on bringing along his little brother; there was that space of nothingness between past and future in which Leo could have made a different choice and changed the chain of events.

A man whose life is dominated by guilt to an even greater extent than Leo's, is Zvi Litvinoff, Leo's friend who fled from the Nazi persecutions in Poland to Chile; Leo's book was in his luggage, to be kept "until you see him again" (244). As the war ends, Zvi is informed that his family has been killed, including his sister Miriam. The only survivor except Zvi is Boris, Miriam's son, who in his turn smothers his children with love to compensate for the losses he has experienced. The truth about the fate of Zvi's family is unbearable; it becomes an almost physical presence in his life:

It was like living with an elephant. His room was tiny, and every morning he had to squeeze around the truth just to get to the bathroom. To reach the armoire to get a pair of underpants he had to crawl under the truth, praying it wouldn't choose that moment to sit on his face. At night, when he closed his eyes, he felt it looming above him. (249)

Zvi is also marred by guilt for having published Leo's *The History of Love* in his own name. The guilt is unerasable. Multiple methods are used both by Zvi and his wife Rosa to get rid of Leo's original manuscript and its envelope, on which Leo has written a note for Zvi: putting the texts in the trash, burying them in the garden, making them dissolve in water, setting fire to them; but the overwhelming feeling persists, just like Leo's words on the envelope protecting his manuscript keep erupting in Zvi's mind: "To be held for Leopold Gursky until you see him again." The guilt becomes the centre of his life; it is the lens through which all is viewed. He has trouble sleeping, he cries easily, he never sends his letter to his nephew Boris congratulating him on his exams. But although the guilt is devastating to Zvi, it is an axis; it is a cause that can explain events. His family might not have been exterminated had he been there to do something. Leo might have had a different life had Zvi not taken the credit for his book.

Oskar's grandparents in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* are also guilt ridden characters. Thomas Schell's trauma inflicted by the Dresden bombing is caused not only by the horror and the losses of significant people, but the coincidental nature of it all. His family, his girlfriend, his unborn child, everyone murdered, but he survived. How to come to terms with life structured by coincidences, and where is the justice in Schell surviving? His unnamed wife who is Oskar's grandmother knows well how mere coincidences determine the course of a life. On the day of the Dresden bombing she happened to be out taking a picture to send together with a letter to a forced labourer who had contacted her years ago: "He had asked me to include a photograph of myself. I did not have any photographs of myself that I liked. I understand, now, the tragedy of my childhood. It wasn't the bombing. It was that I never once liked a photograph of myself" (183). Ample amounts of self blame are obviously among the core ingredients of survivor guilt, but is it also that element of erratic destiny, of chance ultimately deciding the course of events that creates the basis for guilt? Is it easier to bury oneself in irrational guilt than to face the irrationality of life itself? In the Jewish consciousness guilt has appeared as a recourse when disaster has struck. Accepting a cruel fate as a result of the people's lack of belief or proper devotedness to God is a way of rationalising events, and easier to come to terms with than discarding the concept of an almighty, benevolent God, who only hands out judgements when it is called for. Accepting a fate without divine design or inherent logic, subject to the caprices of pure chance, seems too

overwhelming to the human mind. In a similar vein, the existentialist position is also an attempt to add logic to what appears as an absurd universe void of meaning. Though meaning can not be applied through impenetrable, divine will, as is the case in a religious perspective, the full responsibility for defying absurdity is laid upon human beings themselves. It is up to man to create meaning through his actions, and his actions will always have consequences. This attitude necessarily places a heavy burden on man and creates guilt, but it is still a way to enforce some rationality on a senseless universe. Thus, as much as Leo, Zvi and Oskar's grandparents are tormented by guilt, it still provides a centre of gravity, a point from where to view existence.

East of Eden

To Adam he said,
"Because you listened to your wife
and ate from the tree
about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat of it,'
Cursed is the ground because of you;
through painful toil you will eat of it
all the days of your life.
It will produce thorns and thistles for you,
and you will eat the plants of the field.
By the sweat of your brow
you will eat your food
until you return to the ground,
since from it you were taken;
for dust you are
and to dust you will return." (Genesis 3, 17-19)

The special history of the Jews with its many exiles and the repeated threat of annihilation makes the Jews prime citizens of "the state of loss", but though their story is unique, the experience of loss is universal. Turning to the basis for Judaism, Scripture, Genesis expounds on the conditions of human existence, how man's first act of disobedience placed man in a land east of Eden where paradise can only be imagined. The Jewish myths of creation and the emergence of evil are intended as universal stories, and according to Genesis, the basic human experience is loss, of God's grace, of ignorant bliss and eventually, of life. How is this biblical motif of man's fall exploited in the novels?

The image of falling has been popular in Jewish-American literature both because of its religious implications and as the Jewish-American novels were marked by existentialism in the post-war years, the image was powerful as a description of man's solitary position in a godless universe. Already in 1944 Saul Bellow published a book, his first, called *Dangling Man*, its title referring to the protagonist's state of indecision and insecurity when he discovers there is no ultimate point of reference, no overriding moral law guiding him. He is

fundamentally free, but since he receives no enlightenment, no guidance by an inner voice, his freedom leaves him dangling in a hostile world. Another Jewish-American author inspired by French existentialism, Jonathan Baumbach, explores the same state of indecision and fear in the novel *What Comes Next* (1968). The main character Christopher is confronted by his father who asks him what he plans to do with his freedom. “While his father insists that ‘You must make your own choice’, Christopher has the sense that he is ‘falling’, that he has no choice whatsoever” (Codde 227).

The experience of falling is common to most characters in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and *The History of Love* as a result of traumatic events, but they often differ from the protagonists of Bellow and Baumbach because they do not remain indifferent when faced with the truth of man’s loneliness; they are not left dangling. In this way they illustrate what Codde calls a movement from indifference to commitment in the post-war Jewish-American novel (249). This does not apply to all characters in the two novels, though, especially not the old men. The characters’ choice of action after having faced their ultimate loneliness, after the trauma, will be further elaborated in the thesis’ final part, *Exodus*. For now I will stick to studying how the metaphors of falling, gravity and blackness are used in the books; in short how the characters are confronted with the basic conditions of life. The novels clearly exploit biblical motifs, and as should be clear from the references to a couple of novels by other Jewish-American authors, Krauss and Foer are not the first Jewish-American authors to make use of these images.

Falling and gravity are recurrent themes in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. Oskar’s trauma originates with his father’s death in the terror attack on 9/11. Oskar wonders if he might be *the falling man* in the picture that circulated after the catastrophe. In a very literal manner, *the falling man* illustrates the original fall of man. He is rapidly falling towards his death, as there is no escaping the law of gravity. And man having eaten the fruit of knowledge, is aware of his entrapment in a limited existence, so is Oskar in spite of his young age. To Oskar, the terror attack signalled a loss of innocence, a final banishment from the realm of childhood. From now on Eden can only be imagined. Being an extremely precocious child, he provides the following reflections upon the nature of human existence:

Everything that’s born has to die, which means our lives are like skyscrapers. The smoke rises at different speed, but they’re all on fire, and we’re all trapped. (245)
In the end, everyone loses everyone. There was no invention to get around that, and so I felt, that night, like the turtle that everything else in the universe was on top of. (74)

Discovering the restrictions on our lives, most explicitly through the loss of his father, Oskar ends up wearing “heavy boots”, the boots both symbolising his sadness and illustrating how

all living creatures are pulled to the ground due to gravity. The pull of gravity often occurs in the description of Oskar's grandmother. Hiding under the bed with Oskar on the day she lost her son, the weight of the present and past losses creates a sense of claustrophobia. She is visited by memories of dead people: her sister Anna, her friend Mary, her father, her son: "Sometimes I felt like the space was collapsing onto us. Someone was on the bed. Mary jumping. Your father sleeping. Anna kissing me. I felt buried. Anna holding the sides of my face. My father pinching my cheeks. Everything on top of me" (228).

Nowhere is gravitation more powerful than in a black hole, its name deriving from the fact that nothing, not even light, can escape the pull of a black hole. Being a slightly nerdy nine year old, more fond of writing letters to Stephen Hawking and checking facts on the Internet than trying to make friends with his peers, black holes and cosmic perspectives in general interest Oskar. While his father was still alive they would converse about such matters:

When Dad was tucking me in that night, the night before the worst day, I asked if the world was a flat plate supported on the back of a giant tortoise. "Excuse me?" "It's just that why does the earth stay in place instead of falling through the universe?" "Is this Oskar I'm tucking in? Has an alien stolen his brain for experimentation?" I said, "We don't believe in aliens." He said, "The earth *does* fall through the universe. You know that, buddy. It's constantly falling toward the sun. That's what it means to orbit." So I said, "Obviously, but why is there gravity?" He said, "What do you mean why is there gravity?" "What's the reason?" "Who said there had to be a reason?" (12)

So already in the opening section of the book, the question of gravity and the falling as a result of it is addressed, and it is presented by the father as a natural law for which there is no explanation, a fact that is hard to be reconciled with for Oskar who is always looking for his *raison d'être*. And when the falling becomes cruelly manifest with the falling towers on 9/11, the lack of reason is all the harder to come to terms with. To Oskar the black hole becomes a presence in his life associated with the secret of his dad's phone calls, the five messages on the phone from his father trapped in the burning building, and the sixth call that Oskar could have answered but did not: "The secret was a hole in the middle of me that every happy thing fell into" (71).

The link between sadness and black holes is seen in the many people Oskar meets on his journey in New York. Their surname is obviously an indicator in itself, and all the Blacks are somehow marked by sadness; for Aaron Black the sadness is due to illness, for Abby Black the prospect of an inevitable break-up, for Ruth Black the loss of a husband and for A.R.Black the loss of a wife and the burden of having seen too much brutality. Such are the conditions in a life east of Eden. The pull of gravity is given concrete shape in the form of

A.R. Black's bed to which he has added a nail every day since his wife died, making it a gravitational field, a monument of his loss.

Another meditation on blackness is presented through Oskar's school presentation on the Hiroshima bombing which includes the recorded testimony of a woman called Tomayasu. Tomayasu's description of the death of her daughter is a haunting story about the blackness at the heart of humanity. Oskar, who has a special way of memorising odd facts, also informs the class about the relationship between the degree of burning and colour, how dark colours absorb light, and thus of a chess match on a life-sized board that was going on the morning of the bombing, only white squares and white pieces were left. The players were all dead, their blackness attracting light and consequently flames.

The characters in *The History of Love* are also acutely aware of their existence outside of Eden. The awareness of death is of course brought about by the many deaths the characters encounter. Leo and Zvi lose their families in World War II, Leo's son Isaac Moritz dies, Leo's Alma is dead, and the young Alma's father is dead, but to the characters death is also a reality in the midst of their life. It is the backdrop against which all life is measured. Once this is realised it leaves a mark. One could argue that this is what is illustrated in the story of man's expulsion from paradise: man becomes aware of his existence and thereby his death. This is the loss of innocence that makes it impossible to have happiness without sadness. The mixture of the two is regularly hinted at in the book. Leo claims Alma's happiness is equalled by her sadness. Leo also describes how he first encountered death when his strong and joyful uncle died in his sleep:

The fear of death haunted me for a year. I cried whenever anyone dropped a glass or broke a plate. But even when that passed, I was left with a sadness that couldn't be rubbed off. It wasn't that something new had happened. It was worse: I'd become aware of what had been with me all along without my notice. (199)

The burden of man's superior consciousness, which makes morality urgent and death imaginable, is also touched upon in Isaac Moritz' obituary. The obituary includes a description of his most famous book, *The Remedy*, and its protagonist Jacob who is acutely aware of "the insoluble contradiction of being animals cursed with self-reflection, and moral beings cursed with animal instincts" (123). This insight comes early to Alma when losing her father at a young age. David Singer, though an expert on survival in the wild, can not resist the pull of gravity: HE LIKED TO COOK AND LAUGH AND SING, COULD START A FIRE WITH HIS HANDS, FIX THINGS THAT WERE BROKEN; AND EXPLAIN HOW TO LAUNCH THINGS INTO SPACE, BUT HE DIED WITHIN NINE MONTHS (62). Still, at eleven Alma discovers something that might evade unmoveable, natural laws. For her

seventh birthday she was given a pen by her father, a pen that can work in space. When she finally starts using it, the relentless pressure of gravity is eased, the banishment from Eden is lifted, and a way out of exile is discovered. Through writing Alma becomes aware that there are restorative opportunities in language. However, it can also be blamed for causing the confusion the fictional characters are subject to, as any attempt at communication through language is threatened by the traps of inaccuracy and misunderstandings.

Chapter 2: Words for Everything

Gradually I realized that the Jew's real place is the book. In the book he questions himself, in the book he has his freedom, which has been forbidden him everywhere... Moses in the act of breaking the tablets, gave the world a human origin. (Edmond Jabes, quoted in Ezrahi's *Booking Passage* 11)

Herein, in fact, lies the key to understanding the modern Jewish literary tradition: language as homeland. As guests of one foreign land after another, Jews use words not only to protect themselves but to build a secure, self-contained habitat: a nation within a nation. (Stavans 2)

The Jews' love for the written word is a well-known fact, almost a cliché, and it stems, of course, from the people's adherence to God's will, as revealed to them through Holy Scripture. When Moses brought the law, the Torah, to the Jews, it was presented in the form of written words. God himself is beyond the human imagination, shrouded in mystery, belonging to an unknown dimension, but his presence can be perceived through words. Thus the study of the holy words is a way of making service to God. It is an effort to penetrate language to see what is behind, to catch a glimpse of the divine. God, the ultimate reality, is not directly attainable; he can only be sensed through signs. Devotion to language, to reading and writing, is a way of making it possible to grasp what cannot really be grasped. And even from a secular point of view, this can be seen as the merit of literacy and literature; existence is made readable. To quote M.H. Abrams explaining Northrop Frye's archetypal approach to literature: "...according to Frye, literature turns out to play an essential role in remaking the physical universe into an alternative verbal universe that is humanly intelligible and viable..." (202). The old Jew in *The History of Love* has dedicated his life to transform into something intelligible what otherwise might appear as random and absurd caprices of fate. "I tried to make sense of things. Now that I think about it, I have always tried. It could be my epitaph. LEO GURSKY: HE TRIED TO MAKE SENSE" (192). Though he seems to be, in the end, a man without faith, an almost naïve trust in words persists and makes him name his final book *Words for Everything*. In a similar manner, I will try to make sense of Krauss' and Foer's discussion on and experimentation with language in their second novels, as I set out to examine what the novels convey about the possibilities and limitations of our main sign system.

Leo Gursky's epitaph resembles a statement made by the Jewish writer and critic Jonathan Baumbach in *The Landscape of Nightmare*. In this text, based on his Ph.D

dissertation in 1966, he discusses a series of novelists who have “tried to make sense – to make art – out of what it’s like to live in this nightmare” (3). The extent to which language can in fact accurately reflect the vast range of human experience and make life sensible has often been questioned within Jewish culture, most fundamentally so after the Holocaust. Theodor Adorno’s much quoted “writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” is representative of a skeptical stance towards language, though one might suspect his statement was intended to provoke reactions more than express dismay about the limitations of language. How can language convey the utmost terror? Are there really words to map that experience? And if writing is all about trying to make the universe intelligible to human beings, where is the meaning to be extracted from the senseless slaughtering of six million Jews? Is silence perhaps the only decent response to human atrocity and the suffering that follows in its wake? Lionel Trilling, another Jewish author and critic, has stated that “there is no possible way of responding to Belsen and Buchenwald. The activity of mind fails before the incommunicability of man’s suffering” (256). A similar skepticism can be detected in this quote from the novel *Who Shall Live, Who Shall Die* by Daniel Stern: “The great and reckless words of the past have been made obsolete by the massive bloodshed such words can cause today. Words such as: Bravery, justice, heroism” (116).

The Holocaust survivor and writer Elie Wiesel takes a contrary stance. There may be limits to what can be communicated through language, there may not be a word for everything, but as human beings we have an obligation to bear witness. Wiesel’s insistence on telling is unmistakably Jewish. Unless the Jews had not felt so urgently that they had to pass on their stories and thus preserve memories, this culture might have been lost to oblivion long ago. God’s order “And you shall tell your children...” (Exodus 13.3), is followed every Passover Seder (and not necessarily by religious Jews only) by the reading of Haggadah, expounding on the story of the Jews’ release from Egyptian bondage. Haggadah literally means telling. Looking past the obligation to bear witness as a religious duty, what seems to underpin the Jewish belief in telling stories, is the realisation that people need a narrative, both at the collective and the individual level, to frame their lives. And we are back to the need to make sense, but even when things do not make sense, the story can still testify to somebody’s being in the world: “Silence is not valued in Jewish literature because it is a denial of the self, of choice, of moral agency in a world that far too often seems controlled by malice or indifference. Talk becomes a commitment, an admission even, to all that is human” (Aarons 94). In the Jewish imagination things do not take on real life unless spoken of, and

after all, if one is prone to trust religious discourse, the world only came into being by God's words.

The extent to which Jewish identity depends on words can also be illustrated by what is venerated in Judaism. In a synagogue the holiest place is the curtained-off cabinet containing the Torah scrolls. By comparison, you find a similar cabinet in Catholic churches containing not words, but bread and wine, by metonymy God's flesh and blood. Sticking to figures of speech, Scripture in Judaism came to be a metaphor for the missing homeland, a sort of portable homeland. And the veneration of books extended beyond respect for Holy Scripture for Jews during the diaspora. Books, religious as well as secular, were often seen as the most important items in a Jewish home. The devotion to and respect for books is reflected in the burial ritual Mr. Goldstein at Bird's Hebrew school carries out when torn and ripped *siddurs* are to be taken out of circulation. He "can't just throw them away" (*The History of Love* 55). To Mr. Goldstein the books are holy, since their written signs make it possible for human beings to perceive divinity. It needs not be expanded on here, but the success of many Jews within intellectual fields can, at least partly, be ascribed to the value the Jewish culture has always placed on literacy. The Jews have certainly earned the title "the people of the book".

These tentative reflections on words and literacy in relation to the Jewish culture can serve as a gateway into the middle part of my thesis, which is devoted to language. Deciding to focus on language is perhaps not such an unusual choice for someone writing a literary analysis, but I intend to give the study a Jewish twist, preferably one that will make the analysis move beyond the cliché of Jewish bookishness. The overall structuring device in this chapter, as in the previous and the following chapter, is the Jewish images of exile and return. The underlying questions regard how language is used to communicate the state of loss and how it also represents possibilities for return. I should also note that there is a meta-discussion on language in both novels under study, i.e. language and how it relates to reality is thematised. This will be addressed in the section titled *Babel*, and as the Jewish preoccupation with signs and reality is an interest shared by modern literary theory, I am hoping to draw some parallels. This will be followed up in a more practical manner, so to speak, in the next section, *The Iconic Powers of Language*, where the idea is to discuss the narrative techniques employed in the novels. The discussion is supported by the question inherent in this chapter's title: Is there in fact a word for everything? In other words, to what extent can signs represent reality? Whereas the first section mostly ties in with the exile metaphor, the final section, *Literary Returns*, is more closely related to the return metaphor, as it will explore the

possibilities for recovery through language and creating a notion of home through memory. The subchapter in between is in a middle position; its focal point is literary techniques rather than the fates of the fictional characters. Thus, the question related to exile and return may here be rephrased; the question is to what extent the techniques employed bring the readers closer or keep them at a distance. To put it simply, what is the effect of the literary experiments and are they successful?

Babel

But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building. The LORD said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other."

So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel —because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world. From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth. (Genesis 11, 5-9)

The myth of Babel is often read as a didactic story instructing people to acknowledge their inferiority to God and avoid the trap of hubris. However, if seen as a myth explaining the human condition, it provides a powerful image of the confused state mankind is in: there is always distance between people, communication is deficient and the divine power has turned its face away. As in most biblical stories, and especially in the stories of Genesis, there is a sense of nostalgia. We might live in an imperfect age, but there was a time before this when there was wholeness and immediate and mutual understanding. As for now, we are forced to navigate this sea of babble.

There are echoes of the Babel myth in both *The History of Love* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. The tales in Leo Gursky's *The History of Love* all seem placed in a dreamscape. They are hinting at a pre-historic, mythical time when there were no divisions, no gap between people, thus, communication was easy. And of equal importance, there was no gap between thought and expression. The reference to such a mythical time is indicated by the titles given to these extracts: *The Age of Glass*, *The Birth of Feeling*, *The Age of String*, *The Age of Silence*. In the Age of Silence "no distinction was made between the gestures of language and the gestures of life" (113). And the memory of or longing for a time when direct communication was possible has remained in the human subconscious:

If at large gatherings or parties, or around people with whom you feel distant, your hands sometimes hang awkwardly at the ends of your arms – if you find yourself at a loss for what to do with them, overcome with sadness that comes when you recognize the foreignness of your body – it's because your hands remember a time when the division between mind and body, brain and heart, what's inside and what's outside, was so much *less*. (115)

What creates points of tension in Leo's texts is the gradual discovery of the existing gaps. In the fairy tale time of the Age of Glass people apparently believed a part of them was made of glass and consequently an acute sense of fragility permeated their consciousness. As this 10th chapter of Leo's book unfolds and sketchily recounts how a man fell in love with a woman called Alma, it becomes clear that the perceived fragility applies to the difficulties of communication, of finding the right expression and getting one's message across. And it is the sadness related to discovering the impossibility of harmonising thought and phrase, lover and beloved, that concludes the chapter:

Later, much later, he found that he was unable to relieve himself of two regrets: one that when she leaned back he saw in the lamplight that the necklace he made had scratched her throat, and, two, that in the most important moment of his life he had chosen the wrong sentence. (99)

The same realisation underpins the last fairy tale Thomas Schell Jr. told Oskar in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, the one about New York's sixth borough. When the borough that is an island starts drifting away from Manhattan, it becomes increasingly difficult for people in the two boroughs to speak to each other. Since both Manhattan and the imagined sixth borough are islands, the theme of faltering communication is amplified by the inevitable ringing of John Donne's "no man is an island" in the reader's ears:

Young friends, whose string- and tin-can phone extended from island to island, had to pay out more and more string, as if letting kites go higher and higher. "It's getting almost impossible to hear you," said the young girl from her bedroom in Manhattan as she squinted through a pair of her father's binoculars, trying to find her friend's window. "I'll holler if I have to," said her friend from his bedroom in the Sixth Borough, aiming last birthday's telescope at her apartment. The string between them grew incredibly long, so long it had to be extended with many other strings tied together... (220)

To return to Krauss' book there is a similar literal description but symbolic meaning of string. The 14th chapter of Leo's *The History of Love, The Age of String*, tells about "a time when it wasn't uncommon to use a piece of string to guide words that otherwise might falter on the way to their destination" (176). Allowing myself a digression at this point, the strange overlapping not only thematically, but also down to the level of details, makes one wonder what kind of telepathic communication goes on between the married authors, who, by their own account, do not discuss or read each other manuscripts before they are completed. But contemplating the nature of their private communication is not really the issue here. I will stick to expounding on the universal condition of language confusion after Babel, as described in the novels. A playful illustration of how strings of attachment can be formed in spite of all difficulties of communication is found in a description of Alma's and Bird's game of denial in *The History of Love*. The siblings make it a habit to point at things and deny their existence:

“I’d point to my elbow. ‘THIS IS NOT A SCRAPE’. Bird would lift his knee. ‘THIS IS ALSO NOT A SCRAPE!’ ‘THAT IS NOT A KETTLE!’ ‘NOT A CUP!’ ‘NOT A SPOON!’ ‘NOT DIRTY DISHES!’ We denied whole rooms, years, weathers” (53). One night Alma is unable to sleep and wants to tell her brother she is sorry about yelling at him for scribbling in her notebook and for telling him a lot of lies about their dead father, but words falter: “ ‘I’m not awake,’ I finally said. ‘Me either,’ Bird said” (289). Somehow the siblings’ game of denial has turned into a symbolic code creating the necessary connection. The conventional meaning of the words used is replaced by an idiosyncratic meaning that only makes sense in the context of the siblings’ shared history.

Another aspect of the game of denial worth commenting upon is how it foregrounds the relationship between signs and reality. Are things really there if not acknowledged and named? It is perhaps this notion Bird puts to a test, as he exclaims at the end of his and Alma’s attempt to deny the whole room: “I! HAVE NOT! BEEN! UNHAPPY! MY WHOLE! LIFE!” (53), as if denying his sadness would make it evaporate. Similarly the chapter of Leo’s book called *The Birth of Feeling* questions the whole reality of experience. Do feelings exist unless named; need they be signified to take on real life: “It’s also true that sometimes people felt things and, because there was no word for them, they went unmentioned” (170). The correspondence between language and the world, or the possible lack of such correspondence, has long been a point of interest for Jewish thinkers. As can be recalled from the introduction to this chapter, searching for the meaning behind the words, or to use Saussurean terms, *the signified* behind *the signifier*, was for religious intellectuals a search for divinity.

This special attention to language that has its origin in religious exegesis has over time extended to studies without the otherworldly aspect. It is reflected in the work of many Jewish literary critics. According to Shira Wolosky, the awareness of language as a sign system, not straightforwardly mirroring but representing reality, is characteristic of the theories of Jewish-American scholars. Commenting on the critics Harold Bloom, John Hollander and Geoffrey Hartman she claims:

Theirs is, above all, *a theory of figures*: of the way language, on many different levels, is made of figures (or tropes) that “represent” in many different ways. This reflection on the figural power of language is also what they themselves see as the Jewish core of their theories, tying them to traditions of Jewish interpretation – albeit in a very special and very strikingly American context. (Wolosky 250)

Another mostly secular, Jewish thinker with a French-Algerian background, Jacques Derrida, made the exploration of the sign/reality ratio into a vocation. His vantage point is the realisation that there is nothing outside the text. Reality is always mediated through signs, and

in the process of representing reality, you inevitably distort it. There can never be a transparency between the words and the reality they supposedly reflect. In fact, Derrida questions whether there is a non-linguistic entity behind the words. Our understanding of concepts such as *imagination* and *irrationality* totally depends upon a convention for how to read them and on their opposition to other concepts, in this case *observation* and *rationality*. Thus language is difference, or *differance*, which was Derrida's preferred term, as it fuses both the idea that the meaning of a word is determined by its difference from other words and the insight that all attempts at naming reality involves deferring from it. The indeterminacy of meaning, resulting from a lack of a non-disputable entity behind the word, means we are thrown into an endless play of interpretation. Meaning can never be finally defined as there is no actual presence behind the sign: "Such is the strange 'being' of the sign: half of it always 'not there' and the other half always 'not that'. The structure of the sign is determined by the trace or track of that other which is forever absent" (Spivak 17). This is the double bind of language; that we depend on it to convey any kind of experience but at the same time we cannot trust the mediation as there is no solid meanings or *signifieds* behind it. Dizzying as Derrida's thoughts may be, they seem apt to describe the state of affairs in a post-Babel world. They can help explain difficulties in communication by actually tracing them back to the medium used for communication. The problem derives from the sign system itself. Bearing Derrida's combined trust and distrust of language in mind when reading Leo's tales of humanity's gradual removal from a time when experience and expression corresponded, offers a different understanding of what it means, to use a cliché, to be at a loss for words.

Following Derrida's deconstructive mode of thinking, one may ask subversively about the purposefulness of all this incessant longing for words to bridge the gaps. What is eulogised in Leo's tales and in the fairy tale of the sixth borough is a lost time when words perfectly matched intentions and were perfectly understood. But is not this idealising of transparent language just an example of what in deconstructive terminology can be called the hierarchy of binary oppositions? An important strategy of deconstruction is to track down the hierarchically structured oppositions on which our thinking and our language are based. Hierarchy is a key word, since one part in the binary opposition is always preferred. In Western logocentrism presence is valued over absence and fullness over emptiness, but is it self-evident that the presence of words is always more desirable than their absence, the fullness of speech more valuable than the emptiness of silence? Such a train of thought can in fact be traced at the end of *The Age of String*, though what is expressed is perhaps more of a resigned attitude towards the limitations of language than a questioning of the value of

unencumbered communication: “Sometimes no length of string is long enough to say the thing that needs to be said. In such cases all the string can do, in whatever its form, is conduct a person’s silence” (177). In Leo’s obituary of the writer Isaac Babel, however, there is definitely an embrace of the opposite of speech; the presumed clarity of text is abandoned in favour of an exploration of the margins:

Only after they charged him with the crime of silence did Babel discover how many kinds of silences existed. When he heard music he no longer listened to the notes, but the silences in between. When he read a book he gave himself over entirely to commas and semicolons, to the space after the period and before the capital letter of the next sentence. He discovered the places in a room where silence gathered; the folds of curtain drapes, the deep bowls of the family silver. [...] At first Babel longed for the use of just two words: Yes and No. But he knew that just to utter a single word would be to destroy the delicate fluency of silence. Even after they arrested him and burned all of his manuscripts, which were all blank pages, he refused to speak. (182-183)

The longing for reducing language to yes and no and eventually to blank pages and total silence in defiance of the overrating of words has its counterpart in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, where speechless Thomas Schell communicates through the yes and no tattooed into his hands, and Grandma’s attempt at writing her life story results in a pile of blank pages. The above obituary that is included in *The History of Love* is creative fabulation about Isaac Babel’s ponderings on the relationship between words and reality, and his ultimate distrust of the capacity of language to accurately describe existence. Interestingly, the real Isaac Babel, who was accused by the Stalin regime of “aestheticism and low productivity”, declared at the first congress of the Union of Soviet Writers in 1934, that he was becoming “the master of a new literary genre, the genre of silence”². Like Babel, the authors in my study explore how meaning can be extracted from silence. It seems to be implied that sometimes silence speaks louder than words. What better way to communicate Grandma’s emptiness as a result of war trauma than through writing blank pages? And there is intended irony in Leo, who always searches for words for everything, writing an obituary on Babel probing into the ontology of silence. There is, of course, also a strange irony in the surname of this writer who by profession was devoted to words and by historical misfortunes and, if one is to believe Leo’s obituary of Babel, also by personal misgivings was forced into silence. The whole chronology of the Babel myth is incorporated in Isaac Babel, from the trusting playfulness with words during his early career to the enforced and even self-induced silence, as it is realised the cacophony of words might just be babble. In a Derridian perspective, Babel’s taking refuge in silence can be seen as a way of turning binary

² Wikipedia: the Free Encyclopedia. Last modified 26 March 2009. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isaac_Babel>

oppositions up-side-down, valuing silence over speech and absence over presence. Following up with a religious interpretation, what might be inherent in the dedication to silence is a desire to invoke the absolute absence, which is God, the hidden reality humans always strive to capture through signs. Submitting to the truth about God's indescribability and invisibility, the imagined Isaac Babel that Leo writes about abandons words and instead searches for him by listening to different silences, but discovers in his dying moment that divinity is ultimately unreachable:

He had thought the possibilities of human silences were endless. But as the bullets tore from the rifles, his body was riddled with the truth. And a small part of him laughed bitterly because, anyway, how could he have forgotten what he had always known: There's no match for the silence of God. (184)

A similar description of God as silence and absence can be seen in a definition by Edmund Jabes, a Jewish-Egyptian poet:

The word 'God' is in the dictionary, it's a word like any other word...What I mean by God in my work is something we come up against, an abyss, a void, something against which we are powerless. It is a distance...the distance that is always between things... (Jabes as quoted in Auster's *The Art of Hunger* 160).

Interestingly, Jabes' attempt to get a grasp of God hits the same paradoxes and difficulties that are faced when trying to penetrate language to reach an ultimate insight about the reality behind. This reality is always veiled; the signs used for describing it are always different in their deferring from it, just as God is unfathomable. This distance between things is more acutely felt by people who are somehow shaken out the complacent acceptance of a correspondence between the words and the world. When traumatic events occur, as they do a lot in the books under study, belief systems are shattered, including the unquestioning belief in the transparency of words. For traumatised people words are not seen as bridging the gap between things, but because of their insufficiencies, rather building a wall between the individual and the world.

This experience is well captured in *The History of Love* through Alma's description of her grief-stricken mother, Charlotte. Tellingly, Charlotte is a translator, yet another language-oriented character in this universe of authors and journal-writers, which of course fits into the book's project about thematising the role of language itself:

THE WALL OF DICTIONARIES BETWEEN MY MOTHER AND THE WORLD GETS TALLER EVERY YEAR

Sometimes pages of the dictionaries come loose and gather at her feet, *shalom, shalop, shallot, shallow, sham, shaman, shamble*, like the petals of an immense flower. When I was little, I thought that the pages on the floor were words she would never be able to use again, and I tried to tape them back in where they belonged, out of fear that one day she would be left silent. (69-70)

The fear of traumatised people discarding language is a real one, as they are often overcome by the impossible task of putting their despair into words. *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* portrays a character who, at least on one level, has given up this fight. Thomas Schell is left silent. Though traumatised people have doubts about the capacity for language to render truthfully what they have experienced, there is also that other threat of which any therapist is acutely aware: if not spoken of, if not mediated through signs and framed by a narrative, the traumatic events may remain, to some extent, unreal and unacknowledged. This explains why one of the subchapters in Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* is called *Reconstructing the Story* and expounds on the significance of putting experience into words:

The ultimate goal, however, is to put the story, including its imagery, *into words* (my emphasis). The patient's first attempts to develop a narrative language may be partially dissociated. She may write down her story in an altered state of consciousness and then disavow it. She may throw it away, hide it, or forget she has written it. Or she may give it to the therapist, with a request that it be read outside the therapy session. The therapist should beware of developing a sequestered "back channel", reminding the patient that their mutual goal is to bring the story into the room, where it can be *spoken and heard* (my emphasis). (177)

In other words, psychological therapy places a lot of trust in language; it can empower by making experience tangible and manageable, or to put it philosophically, by making it reality.

Such a stance is reflected in both *The History of Love* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, not least through its many extremely literate characters who ceaselessly write their life stories. As much as this strategy clearly facilitates a recovery for some of the characters, which will be expanded on in *Literary Returns*, the novels as wholes present ambiguous messages about the penetrability of language, which is illustrated through the fairy tale elements in both books already discussed. The longing for a directness of communication, which can be detected beneath these fairy tales and beneath the Babel myth, is given concrete shape through specific scenes in the novels. When Thomas Schell, in Foer's book, meets his future wife in a bakery on Broadway, she is unaware of the fact that the war has rendered him speechless. Communication is about to collapse due to Thomas' lack of verbal response. The written note he produces, ("I don't speak." "I'm sorry"), makes her cry. Making communication direct and words finally transparent, Thomas uses his written note to wipe the woman's tears. "...my explanation and apology ran down her face like mascara..."(31). What Thomas is unable to express in speech or in writing is finally revealed through a gesture of kindness. His words dissolve on the woman's face, but his message is understood.

In *The History of Love* verbal communication is sometimes replaced by tapping. Leaving Bruno's imaginary status out of the discussion for now, Leo sometimes communicates with his friend, who lives in the apartment above Leo's, by tapping on the

radiator: “Three taps means ARE YOU ALIVE?, two means YES, one, NO. We only do it at night, during the day there are too many other noises, and anyway, it isn’t foolproof since usually Bruno falls asleep wearing his Walkman” (30). The tapping reappears in the final scene of the book where Leo and the young Alma finally meet. Leo gradually abandons speech, “afraid I’d choose the wrong sentence” (384), and resorts to answering Alma’s questions by tapping her twice on the arm. The scene and the book, if you exclude the final obituary note on Leo Gursky, concludes with Alma tapping Leo’s arm twice in response to his questioning “Alma”, proving she has grasped the tapping code.

Alma’s and Bird’s denial code is of course a similar instance of transcending the boundaries of language, though in that case it is still words that are used. Creative as these attempts at avoiding the linguistic trap through gestures and codes might be, there is no going about the fact that the communication described still relies on signs. And granted one accepts Derrida’s claim that all human efforts to reflect reality through signs can be defined as textual, there is really nothing outside the text. Any hope of immediacy that is at the heart of Leo’s tapping or Thomas’ use of notes as napkins must be denied. The slippery reality humans try to get access to through its sign systems can never be fully grasped. It is exactly its absence that is compensated through substituting it with signs. Making the absolute absence present is like Isaac Babel’s attempt to match the silence of God. The experience of loss is thus inherent in language itself; our babble is the vain undertaking of capturing *the nothing* that is outside the text, and because of its indeterminacy the variations of this search are endless. There will forever be a repetition of the Babel myth, a scattering of people trying to understand each other’s languages and gestures even when they speak the same language. As “prisoners of signs” the characters in *Extremely Loud* and *The History of Love*, and to add a sweeping generalisation, the human race as such, are all doomed to a certain exile. Reality is elusive; it escapes human efforts to make absence present and nothing something. To prevent getting stranded in a realm of vague abstractions, the more philosophically based discussion of signs and reality will end here. As much as this issue is thematically an important aspect of the novels, it is also at work on a more practical level, which is what will be discussed in the following section.

The Iconic Powers of Language

Bird, the devout Jewish child in *The History of Love*, makes it a habit to inscribe God’s holy name (יהוה), on his homework, on doors and walls, on his sister’s notebook and even on the label of his underwear. Trying to ward off evil forces, which literally have come too close to home, he puts his trust in the power of God’s sign. Apart from displaying a somewhat

desperate belief in the possibility of invoking the presence of God through language, he demonstrates not only passive trust but active agency in his dealings with language. Things can change, he believes, through his playing with signs. Bird's cherishing of the sign is shared by Jewish literary critics, who have not necessarily remained brooding over the incapacity of language to truthfully capture the ever evasive reality. They also allow themselves to marvel at the capacity of language for shaping reality. Shira Wolosky, again commenting on the Jewish critics, Bloom, Hollander and Hartman asserts that:

They see forms, shapes, and interrelationships of these figures of language not merely as recording experience, but as actively shaping it. In analyzing such figural patterns, they give special attention to rhetoric, not only the traditional "figures of speech" but to a wider range of tropes, including patterns of sound and grammar, of letters and pauses; and not only in regard to rhetoric's traditional purposes of persuasion but also orders and meanings. (252)

This wide concept of rhetoric resembles New Criticism's idea that a defining feature of literary language is its ability to exploit the iconic powers of language:

"Iconicity" in poetry was to be found, he (W.K.Wimsatt) argued, in metrical structures, in various figures of speech such as antithesis, and in general in the way in which words are arranged in sequence. Thus a disordered sequence of clauses or sentences can act as an iconic representation of material or emotional disorder. (Robey 86)

It follows that creative play with language can go beyond the mere attempt at searching for precise descriptions and original phrases; meaning is also communicated more subtly through spaces and the ordering of words on the page, which means the study of literature must pay attention to a wide range of signifying practises in operation in the text.

This detour to Jewish literary critics and New Critics is relevant for the plunge that will be made into the narrative techniques employed by Foer and Krauss in their second novels. They certainly show playfulness in their approach to writing, which links them to a longstanding Jewish fascination for signs. It should be emphasised that much of the narration in *The History of Love* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* can be characterised, for lack of a better word, as traditional storytelling, though with a special blend of different voices, a feature that I will look at more closely in a later section. The focal point here, however, is the stylistic devices that seem unorthodox and that are directed towards exploiting the iconic powers of language, through pictures and charts, red ink and digits. The text concept is thoroughly stretched through the vast array of signs used for representation. What the reader encounters is text more in a Derridian manner, understood as any human effort to communicate through signs, than a text adhering to generally accepted codes for text flow and organisation. A fair amount of playing with language takes place on a level beyond the words themselves, as the authors, and Foer in particular, manipulate the margins of the text, the

fonts, the line length, the ordering of words and more controversially, even include totally non-linguistic elements such as drawings, pictures and charts. A quote from an interview with Foer can serve as an illustration of his conscious attitude to all aspects of meaning production in a book:

A book is a little sculpture," Foer says. "The choice of fonts, the size of the margins, the typography all influence the way the book is read. I consciously wanted to think about that, wanted to have the book really be something you hold in your hands, not just a vehicle for words. So I was involved in every step of the design, right down to how the book is stamped underneath the dust jacket. (Mudge)

As I am looking more closely into the formal experiments, the study is done on two premises. Firstly, both Foer and Krauss fit into a Jewish tradition that has always valued the free exploration of letters and signs. It is undoubtedly a prerequisite for any writer to have a stake in the development of language. Nevertheless, it seems fair to assert that not all writers are equally preoccupied with the “wobbly” status of signs and reality, but an acute awareness of this fact often permeates the writing of Jewish-American authors. This provides one angle from which to view Krauss’ and Foer’s willingness to experiment with signs, even to the extent that it feels over-imposed, according to some critics. Secondly, I understand the intention of the unorthodox use of stylistic devices as a strategy to avoid the limitations of the strictly linguistic signs, a search for the immediacy so often touched upon thematically in the novels. Making claims about authorial intentions is a tricky business, but as I *perceive* their intentions, anyway, it is to put to use the ideas otherwise discussed and thematised (as shown in *Babel*). Finally, a return to the overarching structure of the thesis, the exile-return motif will be made, as a means to round off the study of literary (and non-literary) devices.

Nicole Krauss has literally used icons in her book. The multilayered narrative with four different voices encircling the theme of loss at the center of the novel is illustrated with four icons accompanying each of the voices. Leo’s deadpan narrative is always introduced by the drawing of a heart, clearly a weak part of Leo, who has barely survived a massive heart attack and tries to direct his feeling to other organs: “ – small daily humiliations – these I take, generally speaking, in my liver. Other damages I take other places. The pancreas I reserve for being struck by all that’s been lost” (15). The heart icon hints at Leo’s approaching death with a heart overexposed to disappointments. The other main narrator, Alma, is always followed by a compass to emphasise the book’s quest motif, especially related to her search for the origin of *The History of Love*. There is also an obvious link to the survival aspect of this quest, further amplified by the titles she gives her notebooks, *How to Survive in the Wild*. Alma’s story is all about finding direction. Her brother’s narrative is illustrated by an ark,

indicating his tendency to read his feeling of imminent disaster into a religious framework. And the icon for Zvi Litvinoff's narrative is a book, revealing his lifelong ambition of being a great writer and the guilt fostered by his plagiarism of *The History of Love*. These four icons efficiently communicate the overriding concerns of each of the characters they accompany. Moreover, on a merely practical level they help the reader keep track of the various voices. Some immediacy is certainly provided by the drawings; still, one might ask whether the author is overstating her point by adding these illustrations. Has she been too eager to lead the reader in the "right" direction? Do we really need the drawing of a heart to understand that Leo is heartbroken? Ironically, the verging on sentimentality that, it can be claimed, is the effect of the iconography, can create distance more than closeness, as some readers might conclude it is "too much" and withdraw from further involvement.

Another and perhaps more refreshing use of graphics are the pie charts included to illustrate Alma's complex background. Charlotte's attempt to describe her daughter's mixed ethnic ancestry ends up in a rather confusing account with Poles, Hungarians, Russians, Czechs, Germans and Englishmen being thrown into the soup. Charlotte then resorts to drawing sixteen different pie charts to get her point across. Thus, the pie charts serve as a way to ease communication with Alma and to show her in a graphic manner how magnificently varied her background is. The attempt is met with meagre success as it only evokes anger in Alma, who ends up shouting "I'M AMERICAN!", which again is countered by Bird dryly stating: "No, you're not. You're Jewish" (153), but on a meta-level it efficiently communicates some major issues in the novel, namely the significance of the past and the difficulties of defining a steady and coherent identity. It throws light on Alma's search for direction, more so than the fixed compass needle.

A third feature, a typographical feature this time, is worth commenting upon. Throughout the book the many subtitles are written in capital letters. One may ask what is hidden behind this loud speaking in big letters. Obtaining a screaming quality is clearly not the goal here, as it is in other parts of the texts where capital letters are used to indicate a character is shouting, but the reader *is* meant to take special notice of these words. To make the example more concrete, I will look more closely into one of Alma's narratives with the heading MY FATHER'S TENT (148). This twenty-six pages long text in Alma's voice includes fourteen entries in her notebook, all with different titles, which seem to function on several levels. For one, the fourteen diary entries actually provide a sketchy overview of Alma's fourteen year old life. It functions as an almost chronological account of Alma's life from the time before her father fell ill (MY FATHER DID NOT LIKE TO WRITE

LETTERS), proceeding with his deterioration and death (THE MAN WHO COULDN'T ESCAPE GRAVITY), Alma seeking belonging and identity through letter writing and tentative moves towards her Russian pen pal (THE BOY WITH THE ACCORDION), to her increasing fascination for the mystery of the book her mother is translating coupled with teenage frustrations (THE ETERNAL DISAPPOINTMENT IN LIFE AS IT IS), the latter title both being a quote from the original *The History of Love* and a suitable description for an adolescent's state of mind. At the same time as the subtitles neatly sum up Alma's life story plot-wise, they illuminate important aspects of theme. The introductory heading MY FATHER'S TENT highlights the experience of loss, which is a core element in the novel. The tent appears in the 5th entry where Alma recounts how she wrote a letter for her father and put it, tellingly, in the Wailing Wall when she went to Jerusalem for her Bat Mitzvah. In the letter she explains how she found his tent in the basement and often tries to recall his presence by setting it up in the backyard and lying in it. There is a towering feeling of homelessness in this account with the sheltering tent operating as the symbol for home. One may also see added symbolism in the connotations a tent brings about; it is both fragile and temporary. Consequently, the heading includes both the longing for the lost father or for belonging in general, and the impermanence of any security, be it in the form of blind trust in the constancy of parents or the unshakable foundations of identity. It may be asserted then, that the capitalised subheadings operate quite efficiently as keys both to narrative and thematic development.

On a third level, still, they add a poetic quality to the text. Though they are, naturally, linked to the text following them, the titles also function almost as brief poems. Their separation from the surrounding text both by spacing and capitalisation make them stand out and demand to be viewed independently, as well as related to, the text in normal size. There is a quality of open-endedness to the titles, inviting the reader to bring in associations. What does it mean, for instance, when it says I SEARCHED OUT OTHER FORMS OF LIFE? And what is with the search of THE MAN WHO SEARCHED FOR A STONE? The titles often put the reader in a detached, but not unengaged, position, since they tend to take a philosophical perspective on life, viewing things from a distance. Furthermore, as indicated by the question form of some of the sentences, they serve as teasers; they make one curious about what explanations might be given in what follows.

If formal experiments operating in the margins of the text are noticeable in *The History of Love*, they are even more conspicuous in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. Hardly a page goes by without the reader being confronted with some form of inventive trick:

conjugation of a French verb running diagonally down the page, scribbling in coloured markers filling four pages, text flow arrested by the inclusion of a number of letters and notes, the latter marked off not only by genre shifts but also typographically. And the list could go on. The author's urge to invent seems as relentless as his character Oskar's imagination. I will therefore limit my discussion of Foer's formal experiments to those that seem designed to give the reader insight into the psyche of Tomas Schell Sr. and his wife.

Oskar's grandma is grappling with language throughout the novel. As an immigrant in the USA she takes a keen interest in acquiring the idioms of her new language to break down communication barriers. It is evident, though, that when it comes to describing her inner landscape, language, whether in German or English, seems inadequate. The grandmother's letters to Oskar dispersed throughout the book are all titled MY FEELINGS, and, ironically, these prove impossible to describe. Her reluctance to discuss her past and its impact on her is reflected in the typography. There is an excessive use of the space bar, creating long pauses between the sentences, which again are unusually short and unadorned. The spaces can visually represent the silence accompanying what she avoids saying. Another typographical feature of the grandmother's texts is the lack of real paragraphs. The sense of incoherence created by the spaces between sentences is amplified by the lack of text organisation. Todd Mueske reflects on how this characteristic mirrors the static quality of her life:

With the use of the flushed left paragraph Foer is pointing toward not only the traumatized state of the grandmother's mind, but also the paralyzed state of her life: just as the grandmother proves incapable of moving on or transitioning in her day to day life, the paragraphs she writes prove incapable of beginning anew. (4)

The gravity of her denial and unresolved war trauma is most explicitly shown through her efforts at writing her life story. The emptiness and the lack of signs to explain it is signalled by the inclusion of three of the blank pages (121-123) of her 2000 page long biography, all blankness. The loss of self that her "written" life story communicates explains why she remains nameless throughout the book. Like her husband, Thomas Schell, all of Grandma's attempts at communication are disrupted by the trauma inflicted during World War II, but there are remarkable differences in the ways the trauma surfaces in their language. Both characters have several symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, constriction being one of them and one that is relevant to Grandma's style of writing. Constriction involves reactions of disassociation and numbness, originating from the situation that caused the trauma and that the individual was unable to affect. The only option then was to escape into "a feeling of indifference, emotional detachment, and profound passivity in which the person relinquishes all initiative and struggle" (Herman 43). Unfortunately, this strategy that might have served a

purpose in an extreme situation continues in the normalised life of the survivor. Whereas this is seen most clearly through actions and lack of action in Thomas' case, through his muteness and his fleeing from commitments, it is seen most clearly through the use of language in Grandma's case. The paralytic, trancelike state of mind finds its expression, or lack thereof, in minimal sentences framed by too much space and with no conjunctions or paragraphing to create a coherent narrative. The logical, final result of this repression is total silence; Thomas' muteness is paralleled by his wife's blank pages.

Thomas, on the other hand, writes profusely, in notebooks, in letters, on walls, mirrors and floors, but as a means of bringing him closer to himself or to other people, his wealth of words is as ineffectual as Grandma's scarcity of them. Thomas even admits to himself that "she and I are no different, I've been writing Nothing, too" (132). As a means of revealing his trauma, though, Thomas' texts are quite effective. First of all, the sense of desperation and urgency fuelling his frantic writing is visualised as he is running out of blank pages in his notebook but still keeps adding text upon text, resulting in more than three illegible pages in the novel (281-284). Communication is quite literally blocked, but the reader immediately senses the underlying need to communicate what he cannot put into words.

The same "out of breath quality" characterises Thomas' account of the allied bombing of Dresden, given in one of the many unsent letters to his son. This effect is obtained, first and foremost, by a total lack of paragraphing, and whereas the lack of proper paragraphing was coupled with excessive use of spacing in Grandma's letter, there is no space at all in Thomas' letter, only words stacked upon words:

I saw a woman whose blond hair and green dress were on fire, running with a silent baby in her arms, I saw humans melted into thick pools of liquid, three or four feet deep in places, I saw bodies crackling like embers, laughing, and the remains of masses of people who had tried to escape the firestorm by jumping head first into the lakes and ponds, the parts of their bodies that were submerged in the water were still intact, while the parts that protruded above water were charred beyond recognition, the bombs kept falling, purple, orange and white, I kept running, my hands kept bleeding, through the sounds of collapsing buildings I heard the roar of that baby's silence. (211, 213)

As should be evident from the extract, the sense of haste and confusion is also created through endless sentences; commas generally replace full stops. In fact, the extract included is part of a much longer sentence spanning over twenty-three lines in the novel: "Because there are no periods, the grandfather's narrative has an adrenaline-like feel to it, one that appears to mimic the general rapidity of which events are unfolding" (Mueske 10). The devices mentioned so far give the reader a feeling of being present as the traumatic event takes place.

Another interesting aspect of Thomas' Dresden account is what it reveals about the way traumatic memories are stored. What is presented is a series of glimpses of the atrocities that unfolded during the firebombing. These images are generally not explained or bound together; on the contrary, the narrative is rather incoherent with its repetitive rambling and lists of sensory input. What is striking about the text is the level of detail in the description of what he *saw*, and the total lack of analysis; there is no attempt to put the events in any kind of context. Thomas' narrative is a typical example of how traumatic memories are kept walled off from conscious awareness as "a series of still snapshots or a silent movie" (Herman 175).

To further explain the nature of traumatic memories, Herman refers to the psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk who "speculates that in states of high sympathetic nervous system arousal, the linguistic encoding of memory is inactivated, and the central system reverts to the sensory and iconic forms of memory that dominate in early life" (39). These unprocessed experiences possess a great force in their iconicity. Judith Herman makes use of psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton's terminology when calling such images "death imprint", and goes on to elaborate on the idea: "Often one particular set of images crystallizes the experience, in what Lifton calls the 'ultimate horror'. The intense focus on fragmentary sensation, on image without context, gives the traumatic memory a heightened reality" (Herman 38). The parallels between Thomas Schell's account of the firebombing of Dresden and the comments on how traumatic memories are stored, provided by Herman and other psychiatrists, are obvious. Though using linguistic signs, Foer has tried to capture the iconic nature of traumatic memories, mainly through an abundance of sensory images. This is not to say that representation is limited to linguistic signs in the "eye-witness" account of the bombing, but when it comes to creating insight into the storing of such memories, it is the traditional words that do the job. There is, of course, a very striking use of non-linguistic signs, the red ink corrections, but these may be said to serve the purpose of giving the reader immediacy to the scene itself, more than giving insight into Thomas' way of keeping memories; the transitions here are fleeting, though. Combined with the information conveyed through words, the red corrections bring about associations to both fire and blood, and thus help the reader visualise the scenes. On yet another level, the red corrections create a different connection by harkening back to a visually similar page at the beginning of the novel, namely Thomas Schell Jr's red ink marking in an article in *The New York Times*, thereby bringing up the thread of family lineage and heritage that runs through the novel. This brings me beyond commenting on how making use of the iconic powers of language gives the reader access to

Thomas Schell's psyche, but it shows how Foer's stylistic devices comprise several layers of meaning.

For all his muteness, Thomas' existence seems seeped in words; he fills his notebooks to the brim and writes letters that leave you gasping for air. Other parts of his written communication are less elaborate and frantic, products perhaps, of the insight that his writing is often more wordy than worthwhile. When writing in this hesitant mode, Thomas resembles his wife more than his other overly literate self. The resignation felt towards the limitations of language is most explicitly shown in the scene where upon returning from Dresden, he calls his wife from the airport and tries to communicate with her by pressing different keys on the phone. While Thomas has attributed certain meanings to each of the digits, all she can hear are beeps. This codified and nonsensical "conversation" is accurately described in the novel, by devoting more than two pages to the listing of numbers (269-271), yet another example of how the author tries to transcend the boundaries of the linguistic sign. But not only does the space allotted to numbers highlight the problem of representation through language faced by the author as well as his characters, it also, on a less philosophical and more emotional level, illustrates the emptiness of Thomas Schell's life, as it dissolves into a mechanical listing of numbers: "What, I wondered, is the sum of my life?" (269). A similar effect is obtained through the inclusion of the conversational phrases written on separate sheets of paper in Thomas' notebook and intended to substitute for small talk. Due to the surrounding blankness, the phrases appear as insignificant, perfectly mirroring Thomas' lack of self-worth. The white spaces combined with the quirkiness of his standard phrases (though some of them can clearly be functional in the practical dealings of everyday life, "I want two rolls" (19), "I'm sorry, this is the smallest I've got" (21), others seem to make for odd conversational patterns, "And I wouldn't say no to something sweet" (20), "Start spreading the news" (22)), the vacuum-like state of Thomas' existence is outlined, leaving him almost invisible.

Thomas' oscillating between verbosity and silence, the latter complete in speech and sometimes bordered on in writing, reflects a more comprehensive debate on how to speak the unspeakable. Especially when confronted with unimaginable cruelty and suffering the question arises: are there really words to convey that experience? This question flows as an undercurrent throughout both Krauss' and Foer's books, since the characters inhabiting them all struggle with coming to terms with their personal traumas. In the case of the old characters, Leo, Thomas Schell and his nameless wife, the traumas can be traced back to World War II. And it was World War II and more specifically the Holocaust that triggered the reflections around representations of terror. Some were appalled by the Holocaust stories

abounding in the post war years, appealing to a voyeuristic desire in people. The literary critic Leslie Fiedler calls it “horror pornography”:

That visceral, irrational anger was further exacerbated by the fact that a catastrophe that had been labelled in an instant cliché “unspeakable” was being not only spoken about everywhere, but packaged, hyped, and sold on the marketplace: Anne Frank’s memoirs, for instance, became overnight a best-seller, and the Nuremberg Trials were translated almost immediately from the headlines to the movie screen. (174)

Insulted by the sensationalism or sentimentalism of many Holocaust narratives, many men and women of letters have declined from describing the indescribable. Fiedler for a long time “resisted all importunities to confront head-on in print the destruction by Hitler of six million Jews” (159), and the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, who lost many family members in the disaster and whose work within ethical theory was clearly marked by that experience, spoke sparingly about the Holocaust. Do they imply that silence is the only decent response to evil? Levinas’ reluctance can be explained with reference to his belief that neither art nor history can represent the truth because that crucial encounter with the *Other*, being the starting-point of all ethical obligation, is no longer possible. The absence of the *Other* reduces him to an object, and when objectified, history can account for his name, the scale of his losses and the time for losing, but it cannot give insight into his suffering. So the reason why the Holocaust is not possible to represent truthfully is not because of “some unutterably evil sublime, but simply because to represent it is to betray the suffering” (Eaglestone 103). Reluctance does not equal a total rejection of all kinds of response to the tragedy. The betrayals are necessary, speech is called for, but all representations must be seen as incomplete and preliminary. There is no last word or final truth, only “contributions to an ongoing conversation” (Eaglestone 105). This detour to Fiedler and Levinas and their qualms about Holocaust representation sheds some light on the trouble with speaking in the books under study, and also on how the authors’ literary experiments are informed by Jewish history.

So far, most of the literary examples I have analysed, though challenging what is generally considered as linguistic modes of representation, can still be considered as variants of literariness (Krauss’s icons and pie charts excepted). But the search for the iconic powers of language also takes the authors beyond language altogether, and what can be more iconic than photography? And maybe photography can communicate more subtly than letters the feeling of absence which lurks in the consciousness of the characters? With regard to resolving trauma, the mental processing of images seems inevitable, due to the nonverbal character of traumatic memories:

At times the patient may spontaneously switch to nonverbal methods of communication, such as drawing or painting. Given the “iconic”, visual nature of traumatic memories, creating pictures may represent the most effective initial response to these “indelible images”. (Herman 177)

The many pictures included in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* are supposed to be pictures from Oskar’s cut and paste notebook, and in this capacity they can be said to represent a medium through which Oskar can deal with trauma. The pictures are also there to provide an immediate communication with readers, which seems to be the underlying intention of Foer’s experimentation, that is, looking for other channels than words through which communication can flow more freely. Trying to get at what is presumably communicated through photography and to what effect requires a closer look at some of the pictures. Many of the images make several appearances, and one such image is the doorknob picture (not always the same door, but the motif is similar). This, of course, draws attention to the quest plot in the book, Oskar’s search for the lock fitting the key he found in a vase in his father’s wardrobe. When we learn that these pictures of doors are actually taken by Oskar’s grandfather, the aspect of family lineage is brought to the fore, much in the same way as the red ink corrections, added respectively by Thomas Schell Sr. and Jr. This seems to imply the quest is related to retrieving the past, understanding one’s background. But one may also add cosmic overtones to the recurrent images of closed doors, and such overtones are already present in other images such as the starry night picture (318), which again bears resemblance to the picture of Thomas’ dissolving text (284), and they become most loud when linked with Stephen Hawking’s letter to Oskar in which he quotes Einstein who describes the human situation as “standing in front of a closed box that we cannot open” (305).

Other photographs seem designed to capture the feeling of absence, or rather the fleeting transition between presence and absence. This applies to the pictures of Abby and William Black (98, 294), both portraits showing the back of their heads, creating a notion of only marginal presence. The same fleeting quality is conveyed through the picture from the top of the Empire State Building (246), where some kind of double exposure makes the inside reflect on the outside or vice versa, making the people photographed seem vague, almost spectral like the memory of the dead. The same thematics vibrate in the picture of the carousel door (198) and the birds in flight (166-166 and on the book’s second page). The latter motif also relates to another major theme in the book, namely gravity, and what is hinted at are ways to counteract it, like birds do when flying. Counteraction of gravity is also seen in the picture of the cat jumping (191) and the rollercoaster (148). In the flipbook concluding the novel gravity is even suspended, and the reversed pictures of the falling man mirror Oskar’s wishful thinking about bringing back his absent father.

The pictures obviously provide a visual entrance into the novel's themes, but as can be seen from my somewhat vague comments on them, using adjectives like spectral, fleeting and flying, their signification cannot be pinned down to a couple of set meanings. This is in a sense paradoxical, since pictures, unlike words, are believed to just record what is actually there. Such transparency is not present in these pictures, partly because of their blurry quality, which sometimes makes you wonder what you see, and partly because of their juxtaposition with the text, but just what is juxtaposed is not always clear. This, surprisingly, can leave the pictures more open-ended than the text. They are not immediate then, in the sense of accurately recording "what is there", but immediacy can still be claimed in their suggestiveness, appealing to a non-verbal mode of communication that, if one is to believe psychiatrists, precede verbalisation in human development. This helps explain why pictures may trigger an emotional response more easily than words; when you get to verbalisation, there is inevitably rationalising, argumentation and explanations, which can be superseded if using the language of iconography, a language that indicates more states.

The juxtaposition of texts and pictures are worthy of some additional comments. The pictures may easily be seen as illustrations of the text, but the vagueness of the pictures and the span that sometimes occurs between textual description and the visual image (e.g. there are 90 pages between the picture of Laurence Olivier as Hamlet and the account of Oskar's performance in the same play), indicate the relationship is not that straightforward. Clearly, the photos are meant to operate in their own right, and their sheer inclusion indicates a familiarity with visual representation, typical of the young generation, to which Foer and certainly Oskar belong. Foer seems to feel some ambivalence towards the conservatism in the literary world when it comes to working with multimedia:

In part, that's good. It protects storytelling. It protects the book as something that is different from a web site or a pop song. On the other hand, it starts to diverge from how most people I know experience the world, which is as a collage of different kinds of media, a jumble of sights and sounds and bits of information, in a way that wasn't true even five years ago or ten years ago. September 11th, in particular, was so fundamentally visual. Can anyone even think about it without seeing the planes going into the buildings or the body falling? I read somewhere that it was the most visually documented event in human history; nothing's ever been seen by more people than what happened that day. In that sense, I think it was the first truly global event. (Foer in interview with Dave Weich)

The latter point is important; the visual impact of 9/11 can justify the multimedia approach to the event in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. It seems fitting, since it has imprinted on the memory of individuals, of America and the world at large in a visual form.

In order to describe more accurately the way photography works in the novel, a reference to the German author W.G. Sebald might be of some help. Sebald's books deal with

the trauma of World War II, how it looms in the consciousness of all Germans. The preoccupation with war traumas looms large in Foer's book, too, and in addition indistinct black and white photographs are embedded in both *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and Sebald's novels. The photographs in *Austerlitz* add a feeling of authenticity to the book, but this documentary aspect of photos is complicated by the fact that they are included in fiction, creating insecurity about the borders between fact and fiction. Similarly, the photos in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* promote a feeling of being close to the events recounted. You see, if only from behind, the people Oskar meets, the stones he uses for making jewellery and the keys on the wall of the locksmith's shop he is visiting, and since these are pictures supposed to be pasted into his notebook, *Stuff that Happened to Me*, there is a doubling of the reading experience. You are turning the pages in Foer's novel, but also in the imagined Oskar's book. What is being manipulated in the use of photography is its inherent claim to an unmanipulated rendering of reality. And because the reader is aware both of the documentary connotations of photos and how that notion is distorted in the novel, a combined push and pull effect occurs; tampering with the reality concept creates distance, and simultaneously the immediacy of the language of photography draws you closer. The same kind of tampering with borders between dream and reality, documentary and fiction is exploited in another book about war, Art Spiegelman's graphic novel about his father, a Holocaust survivor. *Maus* is more real than both *Austerlitz* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* in the sense that it is a documentary novel. However, choosing to represent the Holocaust as something resembling a comic strip and transforming all characters to animals (the Jews are mice, thus the title), creates distance and some disbelief. Paradoxically, it seems to require a certain distance to make readers relate more closely to the drama that unfolds between book covers. One can also speculate that the element of surprise that the graphic experiments produce enables a more direct communication. As the references to Sebald and Spiegelman should prove, Foer is not the only author to meddle with multimedia in his texts. It is an interesting, common denominator of the three books mentioned that they all deal with trauma, a predicament often marked by wordlessness.

Photography may serve other functions than easing communication, too. The whole concept of communicating through pictures is utterly non-Jewish, considering Judaism's ban on using images in worship. One may, however, regard photography as container of memory, and through this function a Jewish tinge is added to photography. Aline Medeiros Ramos claims the pictures in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* are not there to make readers follow the thoughts of the narrators, but as "a memory exercise" (9), making them remember

what has been mentioned maybe a hundred pages before. And on another level the photographs help make present, or at least more visible, the past that plays such a pivotal role in both *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and *The History of Love*. For the purpose of explanation, I may again turn to the embedded pictures in Sebald's narratives. Even though their status as documentation about someone's life is dubious due to their existence in the borderland between real and unreal, they do take on the meaning of testimony. Though blurred and unfocused, they speak of a presence that was there, but no more, of a past leaving traces in the present. This memory function is, of course, intensified by the verbal representation centring on feelings of loss, exile and homelessness, much like Krauss' and Foer's novels.

The photographs in Krauss' novel seem mainly to operate as such tokens of memory. Krauss has dedicated her book to her grandparents, all four shown in photography, "who taught me the opposite of disappearing". As well as testifying about the author's indebtedness to the past, the pictures also testify about four people's presence in the world, apparently making visible what would otherwise be hidden. The playing on photography as proof of existence is brought up throughout the novel, in the account of Leo who does not show up in pictures, and the anecdote about Charlotte meeting a blind man on a train taking her picture, so that in the case of his eyes healing he will know what he has seen. Pictures as testimony and aid for memory are to be found both in Krauss' and Foer's book, and the importance of memory will be explored in further depth in the following section.

In both *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and *The History of Love* there is an interplay between the visual and the written. In an interview Nicole Krauss mentions the self-portraits of the painter Philip Guston as the main inspiration for the character Leo Gursky. Maybe this does not add up to more than anecdotal interest, but it does say something about the author's willingness to explore different forms and media in the struggle to communicate, a dedication she shares with Guston:

But he didn't only affect the content, but also my approach. Guston worked by addition. He added paint on top of paint, building forms that seem almost to bulge forward into the viewer's space. When he scraped paint away, it was only to add more. A history of gestures seems to buckle under the surface. This extroverted quality is at the heart of who Guston was as a painter. Above all, he wished to communicate. (Krauss in interview with *Small Spiral Notebook*)

The objective of this subchapter has been to analyse the ways in which Foer and Krauss have put to practical use the ideas of transcending mere verbal communication, and the extent to which these experiments are successful. The response among readers and reviewers to the formal experiments, not least the use of multimedia, has been mixed. What some have found

pleasantly surprising and ground-breaking, others have labelled silly and gimmicky. The most laudatory but also the most acidic comments seem to be given to Foer, probably because the experiments are so prevalent in his book, whereas they are more sporadic in Krauss'. The critiques span from describing him as a post-modern buffoon to a literary wunderkind. Some extracts from various reviews can illustrate the great variety in responses. Walter Kirn writing for *The New York Times* provides the following caustic remark:

To Foer and his peers (who can't really be called experimental, since their signature high jinks, distortions and addenda first came to market many decades back and now represent a popular mode that's no more controversial than pre-ripped bluejeans), a novel is an object composed of pages tattooable with an infinite variety of nonsentence-like signs and signifiers. (1)

John Updike, who is not totally convinced by Foer's many multimedia tricks, must still admit there is at times efficient communication in the untraditional use of devices:

The book's graphic embellishments reach a climax in the last pages, when the flip-the-pages device present in some children's books answers Oskar's yearning that everything be run backward—a fall is turned into an ascent. It is one of the most curious happy endings ever contrived, and unexpectedly moving. (2)

Finally, at the opposite end of the scale from Kirn speaks Priya Jain: "Even Foer's flashier tricks, rather than overwhelming the story, serve to heighten the emotionality. It seems clear at this point that Foer has successfully graduated from being a one-off wunderkind to an accomplished and graceful writer".

It is hard to reach a fair verdict on the basis of such varied response, and perhaps not even necessary. What for some readers facilitates a more direct response may push others away. What can be credited in Foer's and Krauss' experimentation, regardless of whether one views them as successful or not, is the attempt to communicate the incommunicable, and to surpass the boundaries of verbal communication in order to reach that goal. Considering their narratives both deal with trauma, resorting to extra-textual elements to communicate people's state of exile seems fitting. Moreover, though the inclusion of photography may be labeled un-Jewish, their unorthodox approach to texts can be seen as modern versions of the old Jewish quest: to explore the limits of language, to preempt the meanings of signs. All these efforts to move beyond the restrictions of verbal signs, to illustrate the extent to which they are incapable of properly representing the state of exile experienced by the fictional characters or to provide them with a means to move out of that inner exile, may lead one to conclude that the novels present a rather pessimistic outlook on language. However, the books also display a more positive image of language, not as a closed door (Thomas Schell's favourite motif in

photography), but as the key that opens doors. The restorative effect of language is the topic of the next section.

Literary Returns

There is a quest motif resonating in both *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and *The History of Love*, particularly shown through the novels' young protagonists, Oskar and Alma. In Oskar's case, the quest is given concrete shape through the key, found in his father's wardrobe. The notion of solving a mystery, of opening closed doors is reflected in the recurrent photographs of doorknobs. Oskar's search for the Black with the lock fitting the key and Alma's search for the truth about *The History of Love* and her namesake, lead them to wander about in New York: Oskar knocking on the doors of people with the surname Black in New York's boroughs, Alma going to New York City's Municipal Archive, to the library, to the building where Alma Mereminski used to live, to Isaac Moritz' abandoned house and finally to the New York Zoo. As much as their searching is carried out in a literal sense by actual movement and travelling, it is also carried out in a literary sense through the writing of journals. These journals, Alma's *How to Survive in the Wild* and Oskar's *Stuff that Happened to Me*, make up large portions of both books, and they illustrate how the children's attempt to return to a meaningful order is channelled through writing.

There is a striking parallelism between the motion, both in a literal and literary sense, of Alma's and Oskar's search and the Jewish diasporic situation, marked by the restlessness of exiled people looking for a way to return. The Jewish experience of expulsion and banishment has always triggered movement and journeys, from being forced to Babylon and rejoicing upon returning home, to barely escaping pogroms in Russia and seeking new prospects in America. But the search for a place to call home has not only been a geographical one, it has also been a journey through a literary landscape, looking for ways to understand Scripture and producing texts both religious and secular that can frame Jewish life. It is a remarkable trait of Jewish exegesis, *midrash*, that it does not necessarily seek to find the ultimate interpretation. Interpretation is ongoing and non-closural, creating a pattern of text commenting on text, shown graphically in the layout of the Talmud with the following page design: in the middle is the original text discussing a point of law as extracted from Scripture; around the text in the middle are other rabbinic commentaries in concentric circles. Shira Wolosky sees the Jewish interpretative practices as motivated by a wish to keep the conversation going:

Secondly, in midrash (as in Kabbalah and, differently, in discussions of Jewish law, or *halakha*, as well), there is an open-endedness to discussion, in which generating further discussion seems itself to be a motive, rather than completing a topic finally and decisively. (254)

Taking the Jewish hermeneutical tradition as my vantage point, there are three aspects of it that seem relevant and applicable when discussing how the characters in Krauss' and Foer's novels retrieve meaning through language, and by extension how, on a meta-level, the novels represent the relationship between truth- and identity seeking and language. First, risking stating the obvious, midrash is an interpretative practice motivated by the urge to understand, to make sense of existence. This entails a scrutiny of texts and responding to them by producing new texts. Second, if assuming a Jewish approach to texts, one does not insist on harmonising interpretations, even when they seem conflicting. There is an acceptance of multiplicity. Third, midrash seems to be supported by the basic realisation that meaning cannot be determined once and for all. Value is placed upon the effort of understanding itself, and every generation and every individual has to relate to the texts of the past in their own way, making their own imprint on history.

The journal writing of Alma and Oskar is clearly motivated by a need to make sense of their lives. Interestingly, their writing is not only a response to specific events and happenings, but also to specific texts; Alma responds to the extracts she reads from the original *The History of Love*, and Oskar responds to a multitude of texts, shown for instance through his strange exchange of letters with celebrities such as Ringo Starr and Stephen Hawking. This highlights the literariness of their quests, and for the purpose of showing their resemblance to Jewish interpreters of Scripture, one can also point out the similarities in the interpretative situation; there are texts responding to texts. The drive beneath it all, the need to understand, inspires a psychological reading. Language becomes the medium for obtaining clarity, filtering experience, providing some answers and fighting off the overwhelming feeling of loneliness. This use of the journal as outlet for frustration and as substitute for a human listener is recurrent in Jewish-American novels, e.g. in Saul Bellow's *Dangling Man* and in Isaac Rosenfeld's *Passage from Home*. Similarly, in Jonatahan Baumbach's *What Comes Next* the protagonist Christopher, alienated from his father and cut off by loneliness, seeks comfort in writing his journal: "Journal do you hear me? No one else listens." (9).

The healing effect of creating one's own narrative should not be underestimated. When describing the recovery of traumatised people, Judith Herman stresses the importance of regaining a sense of control, and an important stage in restoring control is simply naming the problem: "No longer imprisoned by the wordlessness of the trauma, she discovers that there is a language for her experience" (158). What happens when things are named is that the

amorphous is given shape, logos is applied where apparently there is no logic. This mechanism, the urge to apply logic, is well illustrated by the *Reconnaissance Expeditions* Oskar in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* used to play with his dad, a kind of detective game where Oskar's father would give him an assignment and some clues as to how to solve it. The final mission was, however, a frustrating one, since Oskar was only given a map of Central Park and no clues. The urgency with which Oskar sets out to gather things from the park and later seeks a common denominator for the paper clips, lamp chain, refrigerator magnet and the other items he brings home, and for a pattern to emerge on the map where he has added dots indicating the finding spots, says something about the need for things to make sense.

The medical doctor, Victor E. Frankl, a survivor of Auschwitz, founded a new form of psychotherapy based on his hard-won insight about the need for a *why* in order to survive: "...unlike the will to pleasure (or pleasure principle) of Freudian psychoanalysis, or the will to power of Adlerian psychology – (it) is founded on the will to *meaning*, which Frankl considers the essential human drive. Frankl therefore dubs his therapy 'logotherapy'" (Codde 66). Writing is the logotherapy of Oskar and Alma and of many of the other characters in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and *The History of Love*. Everyone writes in these fictional universes: Charlotte translates books, Leo and his son write novels, Alma, Bird and Oskar write journals, and Oskar's grandparents write letters. The ferocity with which these characters try to make sense of their lives through writing can make one question, like Derrida, *the phonocentric assumption*: the common idea that the spoken word is closer to the thing itself, the pure thought or feeling harboured by the one making the utterance. While it seems that Derrida's agenda was to prove that neither the written nor the *spoken* word is in an immediate relationship to the thing itself, one can speculate whether in the case of the characters under study, the written language represents a more authentic form of communication. Some escape from a gnawing feeling of unease is granted through writing. It is symbolically significant that Alma gets a pen that works without gravity from her father for her 7th birthday. The weight of her losses is lifted when she starts using it four years later, to write in her journal and to her Russian pen pal. Though there is no way to escape the law of gravity in human existence, the death of her father being a manifest example, the writing offers a way to survive psychologically through bringing her in dialogue both with herself and eventually with Misha, opening the door to friendship and teenage infatuation.

For Oskar's grandparents, too, the writing of letters seems to offer a chance to say what cannot be communicated orally. However, as has been shown through the analysis of

their letters, much of their experience remains unspeakable also in writing, and the attempt to add logos seems to be in vain. But even though the writing offers no salvation, there may still be psychological gains. To explain this further, I will borrow Victoria Aarons' description of the role of storytelling for Grace Paley's characters:

However, in the telling – and this is what makes words so powerful for Paley's characters – sorrow is mitigated. The act of telling provides, if not hope, at least an antidote to despair; it forms, if only momentarily, a future, because the private is shared and preserved in the memory, in the language, of others. (165)

As much as storytelling has an important psychological effect by offering at least a momentary sense of relief, it also has a pivotal role in Jewish culture as such. And it is a striking feature of Jewish storytelling that it allows for many stories, or many versions of the same story, to be told simultaneously. In the case of Foer's book this can be seen in the intermingling of the grandparents' letters and Oskar's journal writing. In Krauss' book there is a similar mix of voices, Leo's and Alma's being the most prominent ones. The image of the pictures of the Talmud with its texts responding to texts in ever growing circles springs to mind. The Jewish exegetic tradition and secular storytelling share a horizontal pattern. Different opinions on points of Jewish law and belief are presented alongside each other and discussions are not completed by the addition of the preferred answer in the final circle. Meanings need not be harmonised. In a similar mode, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and *The History of Love* allow for the main characters being represented through their independent voices and not filtered through an omniscient point of view or the specific viewpoint of one prominent narrator, internal to the story.

According to Aarons, voice is valued over plot in Jewish storytelling:

“we find that the controlling story, the plot, is often but a container, establishing the frames for other stories, other voices” (18).
Voice becomes its own subject, its own character, the character of “Jewishness”. The urgency with which these writers rely on active speaking voices serves as the governing narrative device from which all other devices stem. (22)

What seems to motivate this mixture of voices, in the books under study and in the tradition of Jewish storytelling as such, as well as in religious exegesis, is a dialectic approach to meaning. The Jewish literary critic Harold Bloom has claimed that “texts don't have meaning except in their relations to other texts” (106), and that “meaning is always wandering about between texts” (108). Applying his insights to the chosen examples of modern Jewish storytelling, the meaning that is communicated in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* is compound, resulting from the synergy created by the different stories of trauma, as recounted by Oskar and his grandparents. Grandma's repressed style relates to Thomas Schell's

verbosity, and both stories are valid accounts of the trauma of World War II, just as Oskar's partly comic, partly melancholy tale of the repercussions of 9/11 represents another valid story about loss. Similarly, Leo's resigned tone is not given prominence over Alma's more inquisitive and energetic pitch of language in *The History of Love*. The battle for authorial control remains undecided; one version of truth is not privileged over the other, and in their indecision or liberalism the novels highlight the horizontal pattern of Jewish storytelling; everyone is entitled to a voice. This also exemplifies the extent to which Jewish storytelling favours open-endedness.

To return to the Jewish exegetic tradition as illustrated in the Talmud, its horizontal, multilayered exposition is surprisingly undogmatic, considering it is a religious book. (This is not to say, of course, that you cannot find Jewish interpreters of Scripture favouring a more dogmatic approach.) One should also bear in mind that this oral law was not meant to be recorded in writing originally, Jews fearing it would lead to stagnation and inflexibility. The ideal was for each generation to relate dynamically to the tradition, respecting it, but also modifying ideas so that they could communicate with new times, new historical contexts. To give it a philosophical twist, what seems to be at the heart of this approach is the belief that final answers are not to be found, only provisional ones, and it is most of all the searching for them that matters. For Oskar desperately seeking a pattern in his father's clueless Reconnaissance Expedition, the phrase "not stop looking" (10) that his father has circled in red in a *New York Times* article seems to be the only hint. The imperative echoes the spirit of the larger quest of the Jewish people, the constant redefinition and re creation of the tradition. It is up to each generation to interpret the past and make one's own imprint, one's own stories. Identity formation takes place as a negotiation between past and present, and the personal narrative is always a response to previous stories: "The individual cannot be separated ultimately from the historical or cultural context that, however unconsciously, informs his or her preoccupations. Bearing witness must also then become a process of personalizing history" (Aarons 9). The importance of the past in the process of creating an identity is reflected in the urgency involved in Oskar's search for information about his father, even about the exact way in which he died. Lacking the detailed facts about his last minutes, Oskar starts picturing him as the falling man in the famous 9/11 picture. However scary this image may be, it is something to build his narrative on.

In a similar vein, Alma keeps inventing stories about her father to tell Bird, who is too young to have many memories of his own. Though they are mostly fictional, they are at least something he can use to fill in the blanks of his past. Her own detective work related to Leo's

book is linked to her parents' shared fascination for the novel, which made them name their daughter Alma; in other words, Alma is searching for her own story within *The History of Love*. The Jewish archetypal image of ever new generations fashioning their future on reinventing the past has been used successfully in many narratives by Jewish-American authors. In Jerome Weideman's short story *My Father Sits in the Dark* tension is created by the protagonist's frantic search for facts about his father's past and the father's unwillingness to submit to the son's wish. When the father finally gives his son a fragment of his past, by explaining that his fondness for sitting in the dark stems back to the time he was a boy in Europe and lights were not a luxury they enjoyed at the time, the son's anxiety eases, since this is all that is required for a continuation of the story in the vivid mind of the son: "it provides him with the impetus to imagine a time in his father's past, a world apart from the son, but a world captured in the father's imagination. The father's sparse and matter-of-factly reply paradoxically gives the son the power of vision and memory" (Aarons 57). This son's internal picture of his father as a boy in Europe functions much in the same way as Oskar's picture of the falling man and Alma's fictive memories about her dad that feed Bird's imagination.

Krauss' and Foer's novels include ample examples of the dialectics of interpreting the signs of the past and leaving behind one's own traces. In this memory game the pieces are words and letters. Alma makes lists in her notebook of the memories her parents have passed down to her, the list of her father's memories is numbered in Hebrew numerals, and thus an element of Alma's Jewish background is retained. There is another very concrete illustration of how signs are passed down from one generation to the next. The words that fell out of Charlotte's dictionary on page 69 make a reappearance on page 320, this time as headings of two entries in Alma's journal. The short entries recount Alma's expedition to Isaac Moritz's house and the apprehension she felt when knocking on his door. The strange words from her mother's dictionary; *shallon, shalop, shallot, shallow, shalom, sham, shaman, shamble*, seem to function as a mantra bolstering Alma's courage. In a like manner Oskar carries the memory of his father through the story of the 6th borough, the fairy tale he told Oskar the day before he died. People's presence in the world and their link to their descendants or, to state it broadly, even to humanity is preserved in language. Consequently, Thomas Schell's letters bridge the gap to the son he never knew, and Grandma's letters, for all their restraint, provide Oskar with a past. The same drive to record history underpins Grandma's letters sampling as a child, asking everyone she knew to write her a letter, making sure their existence would not be lost to oblivion. In a minimal sense, Leo's carving his initials into every lock he installed is also

an example of leaving a mark for history; to use Krauss' phrase, it is the opposite of disappearing. By leaving behind an imprint continuation is secured; a future can be shaped on the traces of the past.

The dialectics involved in the characters' reclaiming the past has a decidedly Jewish flavour in its resemblance to the interpretive pattern of midrash. Driven by a need for knowledge, they and the readers discover that any truth obtained is ambiguous and multifaceted. There is a cacophony of voices wanting to tell *their* story, creating a chain of texts responding to texts. Such stories lack conclusions, but make sure to "keep the conversation going". Ultimately, there is a cathartic reward and insight to be gained in the process of building one's own narrative on those of the past:

Creating an identity, in this sense, is akin to the authorial construction of fiction by which one gives meaning to experience, to the events of the past, and in doing so propels oneself into the future, a future defined in large part by a sense of identity and purpose, a recognition of one's place within a historical continuum. (Aarons 34)

Thus, Alma may learn how to survive in the wild through writing with her pen that works without gravity, and Oskar may see what he has experienced by recording the stuff that happened to him. Letters and words become stepping stones in a healing process, a process of *remembrance and mourning*, to use the words in the heading of one of Judith Herman's chapters on recovery (173). What is involved in this process of remembrance and mourning is restoring "a sense of continuity with the past" (Herman 176) and being reconciled with one's arbitrary fate that has caused the feeling of exile. If this is done successfully, there is hope of crossing the desert; there is exodus.

Chapter 3: Exodus

And it shall come to pass in that day, that the Lord shall set his hand the second time to recover the remnant of his people, which shall be left, from Assyria, and from Egypt, and from Pathros, and from Cush, and from Elam, and from Shinar, and from Hamath, and from the islands of the sea. And he shall set up an ensign for the nations, and shall assemble the outcast of Israel, and gather together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the world. (Isaiah 11:11, 12)

The promise in Isaiah's prophecy has served as consolation for Jews throughout centuries. Whatever calamities they have experienced, the hope for a return to the Promised Land has not withered. God will intervene and secure the future of his chosen people as he has always done, as he led his people out of Egypt and as the Babylonian captivity came to an end. The Jews did not lose faith in a future ingathering of the people of Israel, even when exile became the normal state for Jews. The greeting *Next Year in Jerusalem*, uttered at the end of every Passover Seder, embodied the longing of the people. So what now that the land is returned to the Jews? Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi is sceptical of viewing the establishment of Israel in 1948 as the closure of the exile story and a return to a perfect state. The original that people have longed for is only imagined; it does not exist: "...what was destroyed becomes over time an authentic original that can be represented but not recaptured" (17). And the Jewish story of homelessness gets its strength from being without end or closure. It is from imagining that paradise the Jews find their *raison d'être*, to use one of Oskar's favourite phrases. "The story of the *loser*, the *excluded*, the *persecuted* captures the yearning, the unconsummated love, and the endlessly deferred end that gives the story of exile its particular strength" (Ezrahi 27).

There is also precedence in Jewish learning for interpreting the longing for a return to Jerusalem as a yearning for an ultimate redemption only to be experienced with the coming of the Messiah and the rebuilding of the temple, in other words it is a longing for a future Utopia. On a spiritual level, the image of return can be interpreted as a longing for the undoing of past wrongs and the reunion with benevolent forces. Everyone has to search for the Holy Land. This complies with a reading of exile not only as a physical reality, but as a mental state. It is the fate of man to be locked in his own mind but longing for unity, and it is that task of ever searching for redemption in the eyes of God, to be released of the confining boundaries of the ego, which humanises man. It is a profound belief in Judaism that man is not alone, and constantly wanting to confirm this belief, he goes in search of God's presence. Since a total unity with God is not possible, even the mystics are ambivalent as to whether it is attainable, the search will never stop. Turning from a metaphysical interpretation of the

images of exile and return to a psychological interpretation, the longing for a return can be understood as the need for healing and the return to a meaningful and coherent world, often seen in people who have experienced trauma.

The healing can only happen as the individual is helped out of his inner exile to be joined with other people and form stable connections with society; this is what is implied in the title of Judith Herman's book, *Trauma and Recovery*. In the second part of her book, she deals with the stages of recovery, and the aim is always to reconnect with the world:

The core experiences of psychological trauma are disempowerment and the disconnection from others. Recovery, therefore, is based upon the empowerment of the survivor and the creation of new connections. Recovery can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation. In her renewed connections with other people, the survivor re-creates the psychological faculties that were damaged or deformed by the traumatic experience. (133)

There are clear similarities between the religious and the psychological approaches. They both make room for a reading of the images of exile and return as mental states; whereas the exile/trauma means being locked in one's personal space and missing access to life-giving sources, the return/recovery means regaining that access through being in God's presence or through meaningful relations. However, there are marked differences, too. The psychological approach interprets the exile state as abnormal and curable, whilst the religious approach sees the exile as a predicament of human life itself that we constantly have to overcome, and as God and his creation are separate, the conflict will never be fully resolved; thus there will always be dreaming about a return to the Promised Land.

In the following the focus will be on what Krauss' and Foer's novels say about the possibility for a return from the exiles created by loss. Is there a there a remedy for Leo's loss of faith and Thomas' fractured world? Is there a cure for Oskar's loneliness or his grandmother's guilt? Is there a way out of religious delusions for Bird, or a way for Alma to gain a stronger sense of identity? In short, is there a hope of return for the characters in the books? The novels seem to present rather ambiguous messages. In exploring these messages I will combine the framework provided by the Jewish motifs (including biblical motifs and recurrent themes in Jewish literature and culture as such), and the perspectives provided by trauma theory, hoping some synergy might be created by the mixture of religious, psychological and existentialist interpretations, the latter has often proved a source of inspiration for Jewish authors. Whereas two of the subchapters, *Holy Arks* and *The Garden of Eden*, are based on religious motifs, the section in between explores how two of the novels' characters can be seen as modern *schlemiels*; the schlemiel is a figure originating in Jewish folklore and whose tragicomic existence has a remarkable potential for eliciting laughter.

Holy Arks

And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And it repented the LORD that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart. And the LORD said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth; both man, and beast, and the creeping thing, and the fowls of the air; for it repenteth me that I have made them. But Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD.

These are the generations of Noah: Noah was a just man and perfect in his generations, and Noah walked with God. And Noah begat three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth. The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence. And God looked upon the earth, and, behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted his way upon the earth.

And God said unto Noah, The end of all flesh is come before me; for the earth is filled with violence through them; and, behold, I will destroy them with the earth. Make thee an ark of gopher wood; rooms shalt thou make in the ark, and shalt pitch it within and without with pitch. (Genesis 6, 5-14)

The Torah contains stories about two very special arks, the Ark of the Covenant and Noah's Ark. Whilst the latter was the vessel used for saving Noah, his family and two animals of each kind from the flood, the Ark of the Covenant was the container in which the tablets of stone were kept and carried through the wilderness to Canaan. The symbolism attributed to both arks or containers is the preservation of civilisation. When man's sinfulness had brought God's wrath upon mankind, civilisation still survived through Noah's ark. When the Jews were lost in the wilderness, God revealed himself to Moses and reaffirmed the covenant with his people through the Ten Commandments, securing order in a culture on the brink of disintegration. The Ark of the Covenant was seen as a physical manifestation of God's presence, and until it disappeared with the destruction of the first Temple, it was almost worshipped, the closest Judaism has ever been to idolising physical objects. The Ark of the Covenant is lost, but the Scripture it contained is preserved and the written word has maintained a special status in the Jewish tradition, a fact providing the basis for the discussion in the previous chapter of this thesis. How are ark motifs used in the two novels, and how can the symbolism of these motifs be related to the recovery strategies described by Judith Herman?

The character for whom devastation seems most all-pervasive is Thomas Schell in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. What was shattered for him during the allied bombing of Dresden in 1945 was the belief in goodness per se, in a meaningful order behind all the "sound and fury" of human activities. There was no civilisation left, only savagery. It was another flood, but this time the animals were not saved. It became Thomas' task to kill the animals in Dresden Zoo, converting him into a kind of subversive Noah forced to take part in the mindless killing and destruction. In an act of compensation he later fills his New York apartment with animals of all kinds: "His apartment was like a zoo. There were animals

everywhere. Dogs and cats. A dozen birdcages. Fish tanks. Glass boxes with snakes and lizards and insects. Mice in cages, so the cats wouldn't get them. Like Noah's ark" (82). It appears as a futile and silent attempt at saving civilisation from disaster. Still, Thomas' home zoo communicates that his trauma has not completely destroyed his ability to connect with the world. To quote Herman:

The patient's own capacity to feel compassion for animals or children, even at a distance, may be the fragile beginning of compassion for herself. The reward of mourning is realized as the survivor sheds her evil, stigmatized identity and dares to hope for new relationships in which she no longer has anything to hide. (194)

Though Thomas' special connection with animals reveals a potential to overcome his inner exile, he remains mute and unable to form relationships with human beings. His "Noah act" is like a crippled man's attempt at walking; it produces no substantial effects, but it is forceful on a symbolic level.

The unsoundly religious Bird in *The History of Love* also acts within the framework of the flood myth. The loss of his father and the disintegration of his mother as a result, have left him in an intolerable situation. Religious dogma and the formula of God's holy letters seem like a way to ward off the feeling of imminent destruction. Deciding to take measures to improve the state of affairs and deluded by his idea about being a *lamed vovnik* or maybe even the Messiah, Bird starts selling lemonade in the street to save money for his urgent trip to Israel. His trolley is constantly rebuilt as new pieces are added to the strange construction. Acting out on the idea of the world coming to an end through a new flood, Bird is building an ark for his family. Here is a second Noah trying to save civilisation from disaster. When his ark ends up being demolished by firemen saying it was a fire hazard, so is Bird's sense of control. From a psychological perspective, Bird's strategy for coping with his loss is to look for ways to feel empowered; the alternative is to descend into despair:

The first principle of recovery is the empowerment of the survivor. She must be the author and arbiter of her own recovery. Others may offer advice, assistance, and care, but not cure. Many benevolent and well-intentioned attempts to assist the survivor founder because this fundamental principle of empowerment is not observed. No intervention that takes power away from the survivor can possibly foster her recovery, no matter how much it appears to be in her immediate best interest. (Herman 133)

Bird's attempt at taking charge of his situation is sadly thwarted by the woman at El Al not selling him his plane ticket and the firemen destroying his ark. Interpreting his sadness as a sign of the world having gone off its hinges was hardly a productive strategy to begin with, but believing he had a special religious mission, like a Noah of the 21st century, provided Bird with a sense of meaning and power. Refusing to give up his religious calling, he decides

to set things straight on a smaller scale; he will help Alma figure out the truth about Mr. Moritz, Alma Mereminski, Zvi Litvinoff and all the other people mentioned in her notebook. Believing his sister's quest is about finding her real father, he ends up arranging a meeting between Alma and Leo outside the Central Park Zoo. Though Bird has not at all been able to grasp the intricacies of Alma's search, he makes possible the "reunion" of Leo and Alma. Leo retrieves his Alma, though in a younger shape, and Alma's quest comes to a kind of closure as some more pieces to the puzzle of *The History of Love* are solved as well. Some kind of divine justice is at play as the two main characters of the novel are brought together at last, and Bird has performed a good deed, *lamed vovnik* or not. A tinge of symbolism is added through the meeting taking place outside of a zoo, adding yet another flood connotation. The 11 year old Noah character has at least been able to salvage something. Whether Bird's good deed makes it possible for him to return to any kind of normality is an open question. On the one hand he clearly benefits from that urge to be active, to defy helplessness by acting, which Herman claims is vital in any recovery of traumatised people. However, even though he has abandoned his plans of saving the world, he is still operating on a mainly spiritual plane which is not very compatible with the worldview of most eleven year olds. It is hard to make friends with people when you claim you are a kind of Messiah. One wonders if Bird might be lost to religious speculation.

The spiritual plane obviously plays an important role in *The History of Love*, though. The divinity it postulates is more of a poetic than a religious nature. What is it that was saved in the end? What brought some kind of redemption to Leo and explanations to Alma? The poetic justice that redeemed was that Leo discovered his book had not been lost, but had lived and affected people, even given the young Alma her name. And discovering the truth about that book is what ended Alma's quest. This brings me to the second ark of Judaism, the Ark of the Covenant carrying the sacred words of God. There is a certain playing at this motif in the meandering story about *The History of Love*. There is sanctity in the words of Leo Gursky, fuelled by his love for a woman called Alma. Though he lost her and their love story was never what it is described as in Leo's book, it is the ameliorated, emblematic love story that ended up changing people's lives. If anything is worthy of worship it is the magic of the written word, the fantasy of things imagined or the world idealised. Like the Hebrew people considered the Ark of the Covenant containing the physical, written proof of God's presence in their lives the holiest things imaginable, Leo's book is a testament of his existence and the force of imagination itself. The treasuring of the written word which is such an important part of Jewish culture is clearly reflected in the story about Leo's book. Interestingly, the drama

surrounding the original manuscript echoes both myths of the ark. Leo's original was lost in a self-induced flood, as Zvi Litvinoff's wife Rosa tried to get rid of the evidence revealing Zvi was not the proper author. Though a dubious prophet, Zvi still saves Leo's words from oblivion through publishing the book, like Noah saved civilisation from extinction. And just like the Ark of the Covenant was lost when the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem, so was Leo's manuscript. But the contents of the ark lived on; the Covenant sealed by the Commandments is still relevant, and Leo's ideas and thoughts lived on in a Spanish version. Is Leo finally reconciled with his fate in his dying moment when he discovers his book has survived and that his son knew about his existence before he died? Contemplating the chances for a return to meaningful human connections is hardly relevant for a man about to die, and even if his dying moment had not coincided with the discoveries made outside the New York Zoo, it is hard to imagine that there would have been any way out of inner exile for a man like Leo Gursky. The complexity of his trauma would have made recovery difficult: "While patients with simple post-traumatic stress disorder fear they may be losing their minds, people with the complex disorder often feel they have lost themselves" (Herman 158).

If one is to see any signs of reconciliation in Leo, the return image seems more appropriate than the concept of recovery. On a symbolical level the preservation of his writing, the survival of his book and its connections with various people can be seen as a bridge between Leo and the world:

What if the things I believed were possible were really impossible, and the things I believed were impossible were really not? For example. What if the girls sitting next to me on this bench was real? What if she was named Alma after my Alma? What if my book hadn't been lost in a flood at all? What if- [...] I wanted to say her name aloud, it would have given me joy to call, because I knew that in some small way it was my love that named her. (380-381, 384)

If less inclined to interpret the last scene of the book in terms of a reignited faith in the Covenant of God, one may see Leo in the context of the death-of-God theology, a movement that was kindled by the atrocities of World War II and was often combined with an existentialist approach. The question was how to believe in an almighty, benevolent God who allows the ravage of human civilisation and the genocide of six million Jews? How could Jews go on believing they were the chosen people bound to God through a special Covenant? For many Jewish theologians resorting to the usual explanation of just punishment seemed almost obscene in relation to the scale of the disaster. While some turned to ideas of God having turned his face away, an eclipse that would pass, or of the Holocaust being a punishment of Western civilisation as such, and not of the Jewish people in particular, others

made more radical claims. The Jewish theologian Richard Rubinstein went far in declaring the death of God in *After Auschwitz*:

Had I lived in another time or in another culture, I might have found some other vocabulary to express my meaning. I am, however, a religious existentialist after Nietzsche and after Auschwitz. When I say we live in the time of the death of God, I mean that the thread uniting God and man, heaven and earth, has been broken. We stand in a cold, silent, unfeeling cosmos, unaided by any purposeful power beyond our own resources. After Auschwitz, what else can a Jew say about God? (152)

Rubinstein did not dispense of religion and God altogether, though. He introduced a more pantheistic image of God and discarded the biblical, covenantal God. The God who controls history, who protects his chosen people and guarantees order through the Covenant no longer existed. Such an image of God seems absent from Leo's universe, too. There was no protection to be found or lesson to be extracted when his family was killed and his prospects of a future were shattered in the USA, and this resignation, this lack of faith is what characterises Leo throughout the book. Life to Leo appears as a series of humiliations for which there is no remedy or explanation: "When your pants are down around your ankles that's when everyone arrives, never a moment before when you might have been in a position to receive them" (137).

Still, there is no doubt that there is a sense of fulfilment or reconciliation towards the end of the book; there is that element of poetic justice. If Leo's faith in God as the ultimate reference point for justice, order and goodness is not restored, the idea of the Ark of the Covenant is. The written word that the Ark protected has survived. To stick with the existentialist approach in the Rubinstein quote, Leo has faced the coldness of a universe devoid of meaning, which leaves almost no choice but to accept the Sartrean challenge of creating one's own if not to perish under the weight of absurdity. For Leo his books were his way out of senselessness. This value attributed to art and in particular writing is in fact seen in Sartre's writing, too. In *La Nausée* (1938), Roquentin is appalled by the absurdity of existence to the point of nausea, but his admiration for the jazz song *Some of These Days* brings him out of his anxiety attack and makes him realise "that only art – specifically writing, in Roquentin's case – can justify one's existence. So Roquentin decides to write a novel about his life (arguably the diary at hand)" (Codde 115). Applying a philosophical discourse focusing on the value of choice and action in the discussion of Bird's Noah act, one might see him, not as a child who takes refuge in religion, but as a true existentialist hero who takes it upon himself to mend the world in the absence of God. No God intervened to protect his ark in the alley, to help him fly to Israel to complete his vision of being a sort of prophet, or to prevent his father from dying. So now Bird decides to unite people devastated by fate; it is a

belief in human community that he restores, it is an anthropomorphic covenant that he saves. Retaining a belief in the human contract is a pressing issue for the schlemiel figure that will be discussed in the next section.

The Schlemiel

Once there was a poor man, a schlemiel. He was so unhappy that he took pleasure in day-dreaming. One day he uttered the following prayer: "Dear God – give me ten thousand dollars for the New Year. I'll tell you what – I'll make a deal with you. I swear to give five thousand dollars of this amount for charity, the other half let me keep. You say you have doubts about my intentions? – then give me the five thousand dollars and you give to charity yourself." (Pinsker 33)

Tracing the exact origin of the schlemiel is impossible. He is a folk character who appears in different versions in a number of different texts, and more importantly, in a number of Jewish jokes and stories like the one above. Some say the character can be traced back to Scripture itself; there is a Schelumiel ben Zurishaddai that is mentioned in Numbers, and also Talmudic texts. However, we mainly know him through oral tradition, particularly the oral tradition of the East European shetls. He is the fool, the bungler whose projects always amount to nothing. Sometimes he is a cuckold and in more intelligent versions he might be the man revealing the shortcomings or hypocrisies of society in unexpected ways. What often made him a laughing stock was his tendency to distort reality. He would fail to see it when he was cheated on by his wife, he would foster unrealistic dreams about his rise to fortune and would be deceived by the false pretences of other people. You could say he is gullible, but his leaning towards the world of imagining and his need for embellishing things were agreeable and recognisable to Jews in the shetl.

The schlemiel might be accompanied by the equally inadequate *schilmazzel*, the only difference between them being that whereas the schlimazzel is simply haunted by bad luck, the schlemiel has a hand in creating his bad luck. He could cry out like Shakespeare's Romeo that he is fortune's fool, but like Romeo, his failure is not simply due to him being ill-starred. Unlike Romeo, the schlemiel character is not intended to make you ponder upon the tragic aspects of life, quite the contrary; he is a character of comic relief. And relief is a keyword here. For poor Jews in the shetl suffering from the gentiles' scorn and lacking prospects of economic advancement, laughing at and with the schlemiel was a way of rising above their destitute situation, at least mentally. The self-deprecating humour represented by the schlemiel character is an excellent example of psychological survival tactics. Sanford Pinsker has the following reflection on this aspect of Jewish humour:

Perhaps Jewish “humour” began when somebody wondered if maybe, just for once, God could choose someone else! Or perhaps, Jewish humour was never really humour in the ordinary sense of the word; rather it was a weapon in the uphill battle for survival. With no land or army of its own – with none of the rights normally given to citizens – staying alive as a people was a decidedly open question. (Pinsker 14)

The failures and misfortunes of the schlemiel could serve as a metaphor for the hardships of a people in exile, and instead of despairing they could take delight in laughing at their troubles: “Jewish humour is often described as laughter through tears” (Pinsker 19).

The schlemiel also became a stock figure in more serious literature. One of the more well-known schlemiels in Jewish-American fiction is Tevye in Sholom Aleichem’s Tevye stories, popularised through the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*. Tevye is a financial failure, trapped in the deadlock of shetl life in Russia. The difficulties he encounters are, however, always balanced by his good-hearted humour and the “wealth” of communal values. Irony is an integral part of Tevye’s worldview:

However, it is Tevye who best captures the tragicomic spirit of the diaspora. When he says, “With God’s help I starved to death – I and my wife and children – three times a day, not counting supper”, he expresses emotion that was the epitome of ironic affirmation. (Pinsker 44)

According to Pinsker, the schlemiel’s movement to American soil with its ample opportunities for economic success, and later the genocide during World War II changed the schlemiel in literature. The socio-economic schlemiel became the psychological schlemiel, and this new schlemiel is not embraced by his community like Tevye. He is more laughed *at* than *with*. I. B. Singer’s Gimpel the Fool is such a schlemiel. He is cuckolded by his wife, ridiculed, scorned, and merely tolerated by the other villagers. Still, he preserves his faith and his good heart, but he is more doubtful than previous schlemiels. Even taking refuge in thoughts of the afterlife is problematic, as the devil tries to convince him the world to come is yet another deception. The internal focus is even more marked in Saul Bellow’s literature. Many of his failing protagonists are victims of their own psyche more than external circumstances. They become misinterpreters of reality because they operate “on the truth of feeling rather than the truth of fact” (Pinsker 147). In Bernard Malamud’s fiction, too, there is an internal focus; the socioeconomic limitations are of less importance to the schlemiel. Malamud tends to dwell on the schlemiel’s stumbling in the search for principles and responsibilities. He has now become an outcast missing moral guidance and longing for human community:

although now he (the schlemiel) was more interested in moral transcendence than economic advancement. For Malamud, especially, the schlemiel was a moral bungler, a character whose estimate of the situation, coupled with a overriding desire for “commitment”, invariably caused comic defeats of one sort or another. (Pinsker 89)

This misfit prone to self-induced disasters is still alive in Jewish culture and in popular culture, though some claim he was particularly suited to capture the issues of the 50s and 60s:

the new generation of Jewish American writers has little use these days for the schlemiel. Broadly speaking, the conditions that inspired the construction of the schlemiel characters in the 1950s and 1960s – feelings of cultural marginality and spiritual alienation – no longer seem to dog contemporary Jews or Jewish American writers. (Furman 161)

Still, Furman has to admit that the figure is very visible in mass culture, for instance the neurotic, male characters in Woody Allen's films have conspicuous schlemiel traits, and the schlemiel is perhaps not totally abandoned in literature either.

Be it that Foer and Krauss have streaks of the old-fashioned writer, or that the stock character is in fact compatible with modern literature, anyway, the schlemiel figure seems to have lent its imprint on some of the characters in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and *The History of Love*. The different aspects of the schlemiel, from the mostly comic figure of Jewish lore via the subdued but yet hopeful fool, to the more tragic figure lacking hope too, and the moral bungler seeking belonging, can be traced in Krauss' and Foer's narratives. The "schlemielhood" of the characters provides some much needed comic relief in these universes of grim fates. For the characters themselves the self-mockery and the distance created by the schlemiel position serve to balance the sinister reality of their losses and thus enable a return from their exile. However, it might be disputed whether the humour mainly creates some balance in the reader's perception of the books and not really in the lives of the characters, since much of it stems from our outside view on their lives. It is undisputable, though, that both books include scenes that illustrate this particular brand of Jewish humour, the laughing in the midst of despair.

The most apparent schlemiel is Leo Gursky who epitomises not so much the socioeconomic schlemiel, but certainly the fool who elicits laughter for his failure to adapt to social norms, the one who doubts the order of the universe and the Malmudian fool who longs for connection. One might argue, though, that the misfortunes of his "literary career", his books that were published in the names of others, also prove him a socioeconomic schlemiel. He was never credited for the books that might have granted him some social recognition and opportunities to rise above the status of an obscure New York locksmith. And when it starts to dawn on him that his *History of Love* has survived after all, he demonstrates the typical schlemiel quality of misinterpreting reality. He has got it all wrong, and he is not sure whether his new reading of reality can be trusted. Is there in fact a real Alma sitting next to him on a bench outside the New York Zoo:

What if- A man walked past. *Excuse me*, I called to him. *Yes*, he said. *Is someone sitting next to me?* The man looked confused. *I don't understand*, he said. *Neither do I*, I said. *Would you mind answering the question? Is someone sitting next to you?* he said. *That's what I'm asking*. And he said, *Yes*. So I said, *Is it a girl, fifteen, possibly sixteen, then again she could be a mature fourteen?* He laughed and said, *Yes. Yes as in the opposite of no? As in the opposite of no*, he said. (381)

There are other episodes like this when Leo becomes the laughing stock because he simply acts strangely, not following the codes of social behaviour. Attending a reading by his son, consumed by a need to see and communicate with Isaac, Leo puts a piece of paper with his name on it into his son's hands. And wanting more than Isaac signing his book, he is unable to leave the line:

I tried to say something but there was no sound. He smiled and thanked me. And yet. I didn't budge. *Is there something else?* He asked. I flapped my hands. The woman behind me gave me an impatient look and pushed forward to greet him. Like a fool I flapped. What could he do? He signed the woman's book. It was uncomfortable for everyone. My hands danced on. The line had moved around me. Occasionally he looked up at me, bewildered. Once, he smiled at me the way you smile at an idiot. But my hands fought to tell him everything. At least as much as they could before a security guard firmly grasped my elbow and escorted me out of the door. (39-40)

The image of a social misfit with peculiar modes of behaviour is firmly established in this scene.

Another comic figure is Leo's friend Bruno, living in the apartment above Leo's, who takes an interest in listening to books on tape. When he gets to *Ulysses* his habit of rewinding whenever he does not fully understand is taken to excess. After a month Leo has had it with "INELUCTABLE MODALITY OF THE VISIBLE: AT LEAST THAT: Pause, rewind. INELUCTABLE MODALITY OF THE: Pause, rewind. INELUCTABLE MODALITY. Pause. INELUCT" (36), and buys him a Sony Sportsman: "and now he schleps it around in clipped to his belt. For all I know he just likes the sound of an Irish accent" (37). As the reader later realises Bruno is just an imaginary friend (he actually died in 1941), the scene takes on a tragic tinge. The fool listening to incomprehensible English in audio books is just Leo trying to inhabit his loneliness with sounds and phantoms. Leo becomes the Malmudian fool desperately seeking some sort of attachment and recognition. The desired feeling of belonging suddenly hits Leo on a visit to Starbucks. There is no spilling of coffee this time, only an embracing warmth and a sense of being part of it all, of the crossword puzzle engaging the people by the table next to him, of smiling at people who smile back. The extent to which he both desires this community and doubts he has any part in it is shown when Leo is prompted to make a phone call to his imaginary friend:

Bruno? Yes? Isn't it good to be alive? No thank you, I don't want to buy anything. I'm not trying to sell you anything! It's Leo. Listen. I was sitting here drinking coffee in Starbucks and suddenly it hit me. Who hit you? Ach, listen! It hit me how good it is to be alive. Alive! And I wanted to tell you. Do you understand what I'm saying. I'm saying life is a thing of beauty, Bruno. A thing of

beauty and a joy forever. There was a pause. Sure, whatever you say Leo. Life is a beauty. And a joy forever, I said. All right, Bruno said. And a joy. I waited. Forever. I was about to hang up when Bruno said, Leo? Yes? Did you mean human life? (120-121)

The comedy of the phone call is contrasted by Leo's discovery of his son's obituary in a newspaper shortly after, enhancing that typical quality of Jewish humour, the laughing in the midst of despair. In this particular scene Leo demonstrates a whole range of schlemiel characteristics. He enters the coffee shop in good spirits, determined not to make a big production of the coffee order like he often does, but to act "like any normal person, a citizen of the world" (120). Still, one can easily imagine he is a spectacle with his meticulous and awkward behaviour, an old fool in stained clothes trying hard to pass for a man of the world, causing raised eyebrows and uneasy smiles. The doubling of his character in the telephone "conversation" reveals both the schlemiel of the Malamudian sort who suffers but never stops longing for and believing in the values of human community, and the one of the Gimpel the Fool format, who might not have abandoned his beliefs altogether but has serious doubts about the beauty of human life.

The scene of the old man in conversation with his imaginary friend contradicting his own statements, certainly adds elements of comedy to the novel, but does Leo's "schlemielhood" provide any relief for him? This is perhaps a redundant question, considering fiction is all about evoking thoughts and emotions in the reader. However, the reader's response is a result of both of the bird's eye view and the internal view the reader gets when sympathising with characters, and in this respect, seeing things from Leo's perspective is relevant for an overall assessment of what kind of comedy *The History of Love* offers. One may also question whether Leo is a real schlemiel and not simply a schlimazzel. To address the latter question first, many of Leo's misfortunes are definitely a result of calamities and coincidences beyond his control: the extinction of his family, his hiding from the Nazis in the woods, the apparent loss of the manuscript, Alma marrying someone else. Is he just a real fortune's fool? To borrow from Pinsker's vocabulary: Is he the one soup gets spilt upon and not the one spilling the soup (101)? Again, according to Pinsker, the whole idea of not being responsible for one's fortunes and misfortunes, which might have applied in the claustrophobic shetl, seems totally un-American. "Furthermore, the sheer impact of Freudian psychology made it harder and harder to believe anybody could really be a schlimazzel – that is, a character not really responsible for his run of bad luck" (Pinsker 51). And Leo could have made different choices. He could have fought for Alma, or let go of his obsession for her to find happiness elsewhere. He could have let his son know about him before it was too late. He could have made more of an effort to adapt, to avoid ending up as the awkward man with

flapping hands and a strained smile. One must conclude then, that Leo is definitely a schlemiel and not a schlimazzel.

As for Leo seeing any comic aspects of his life or not, it seems right to claim that although some scenes are clearly comic due to the distanced view the reader is allowed to take, some of this distance is available to Leo, too. His mock telephone conversation with Bruno reveals that he is able to both delight in his sudden sense of belonging and at the same time mock himself for believing in it. Similarly, his matter-of-fact reflections on the inevitable humiliations of human life, how he will probably be found dead in the toilet considering he spends so much time there, and how people always show up when your pants are down around your ankles, speak of a self-deprecating humour, which might be bleak, but the force of black humour should not be underestimated. Allowing a brief digression at this point, the image of being caught with your pants down is a standard farcical scene. Malamud, known for his moral twist on the schlemiel, did not shun plain situational comedy and exploited this image in *A New Life* (1961). The protagonist Levin faces the opportunity for an erotic encounter with the barmaid Laverne in a barn, but the scene evolves into a comic coitus interruptus as Levin's friend Sadek appears and steals their clothes. More mishaps including pants occur when Levin during his first class as a teacher at Cascadia College, becomes the laughing stock of the students when he delivers a lofty speech on how education can broaden their minds with his zipper open (Pinsker 107). This example shows how the typical slapstick humour based on the humiliation of the protagonist has been an integral part of Jewish-American literature with schlemiel characters, and it is revisited in *The History of Love*. But whereas the laughter elicited by the comic scenes in *A New Life* seems mostly to be at the expense of Levin, Leo seems to be aware of his "schlemielhood" to a higher degree, and is thus granted the meagre pleasure of the caustic, self-deprecating remark, if only heard by himself.

However, Leo's life-saving schlemiel quality seems to be his capacity for distorting reality, in short his imagination. It was often this specific aspect of the schlemiel that made him so laughable and ridiculous, his wild dreams and his misreading of reality, but the shetl Jew or the American Jew would laugh also out of recognition. Everyone could recognise the urge to invent as a means to escape reality or improve it. Leo discovers his talent for imagining at the age of ten. Going home from school with other boys he wants to feel close to, but finding himself unable to take part in their shouting and laughing, he suddenly sees an elephant in the square: "I knew I was imagining it. And yet. I wanted to believe" (357). Writing becomes the outlet for his vivid imagination, and when Alma is gone, she becomes

his muse, the subject for his writing and his reason to live. The line between fiction and reality is increasingly blurred, to the extent that at the end of his life he admits he “can barely tell the difference between what is real and what I believe” (359). “The truth is that she told me she couldn’t love me. When she said goodbye, she was saying goodbye forever” (355).

The lying about reality is a requisite for living. The schlemiel Leo demonstrates a core element of Jewish tradition, the value placed on imagination, invaluable with regard to psychic health:

In terms of physical health, there was little that could be done; pogroms cut across the line of economic success and gestures of assimilation. To a drunken Cossack, all Jews were the same. But psychic health was another matter. Both the institutional religion and the folk culture celebrated “life”, although even here it was often done with an ironic wink. After all, to “live” is to be involved with illusions, with dreams of success and material advancement. Ghetto Jewry shared these aspirations, but they were also aware that such is the stuff of which foolishness is made. But perhaps the best way to explain this shaky truce between illusion and reality is to rely on one of Yiddishkeit’s most honoured traditions – the story. (Pinsker 33)

In the laughter spent on the schlemiels of Jewish lore and literature there is also an understanding of the sanity of his misreading of reality. There is an echo of Pinsker’s comment on the relationship between illusion and reality in Jewish culture in a remark Nicole Krauss made on her book in an interview in 2005: “ ‘I’m interested in the notion of necessary lying to compensate for the meanness in the world,’ Krauss says. ‘Leo took what is a tragedy and what could have been ruinous in his life and he makes his love a fuel for staying alive and for his humor’” (Marsh).

Are there any schlemiels to be encountered in Foer’s book? Thomas Schell could aspire for the title. His outsider position and inability to come to grips with reality are two qualities often associated with the figure. However, Thomas Schell seems far too sinister to be labelled a schlemiel. There is little comedy to balance the bleakness of his existence. He is an odd character certainly, but the tragic atmosphere surrounding him quenches any impulse to laugh about his awkwardness. His grandson, on the other hand, offers both foolishness and outsider traits in ample amounts. The schlemiel part is assigned to Oskar already in the first chapter of the book. He presents the brief history of his jujitsu course dating three and a half months back. Though not a very physically active child, Oskar is very motivated for this class. Learning self-defense might be a good way to resolve his safety issues. However, the class soon takes a turn for the absurd when the teacher insists Oskar should “destroy his privates”, as a demonstration of how a well-trained body will not be affected by being hit:

I told him, “I’m a pacifist,” and since most people my age don’t know what that means, I turned around and told the others, “I don’t think it’s right to destroy people’s privates . Ever. Sensei Mark said, “Can I ask you something?” I turned back around and told him, “ ‘Can I ask you something’

is asking me something.” He said, “Do you have dreams of becoming a jujitsu master?” “No,” I told him, even though I don’t have dreams of running the family jewelry business anymore. He said, “Do you want to know how a jujitsu student becomes a jujitsu master?” I want to know everything,” I told him, but that isn’t true anymore either. He told me, “A jujitsu student becomes a jujitsu master by destroying his master’s privates.” I told him, “That’s fascinating.” My last jujitsu class was three and a half months ago. (2)

The scene has elements of slapstick comedy with both characters involved grossly exaggerated, the extremely precocious, intellectual and unathletic boy contrasted by the muscular trainer, who for lack of intelligence or interest totally ignores Oskar’s sophistic retort to his question. The entire scene revolves around hitting, typical of slapstick comedy, in which physical violence is made funny. (As noted above, Jewish-American literature is often lavishly sprinkled with pure situational comedy and blunders.) The schlemiel figure encountered in the self-defense class is of a classic type, the butt not managing the codes of social behaviour. Jujitsu instruction turned into a mini-lecture on pacifism is clearly not what the other children or Sensei Mark expected or wanted. But though the reader laughs at Oskar for his ineptness, not all the laughter is at his expense. Oskar also has the schlemiel role of a truth-teller, the fool holding a mirror reflecting society’s ills or vanities. Mark, who seems childishly proud of his muscles and who is almost dumbfounded by answers that are slightly more sophisticated than “yes” or “no”, appears to be a victim of his vanity, a representative of a society placing too much value on fitness and the impulse to strike back. So, while we laugh at Oskar’s lack of fighting spirit, we also laugh at Mark. As Oskar’s ironic “fascinating” concludes the conversation, Oskar even seems to get the upper hand, almost out of character for a schlemiel.

Another instance of Oskar in the role of the wise fool revealing the world’s follies is found in the scene where he visits Dr. Fein, a psychologist who is supposed to help Oskar deal with his loss. But the consultation gets a rough start. Dr. Fein’s salutation, “Hey, buddy” (200), does not resonate well with Oskar, who immediately corrects him, “Actually, I’m not your buddy” (200), and from then on it only gets worse, but from a reader’s point of view, also humoristic. Certainly, some of the laughter is elicited by Oskar acting up to the stereotype of the nerd; he expresses his lack of interest in sport, “Sports aren’t fascinating”(200), and he has a constant urge to correct Dr. Fein’s language, “I don’t think that’s a real word you used. Emotionalness” (201). Still, what makes the scene funny is how Oskar reveals Dr. Fein’s incapacity for helping or even understanding Oskar’s grief, for instance he tries to attribute some of Oskar’s problems to puberty. Considering Oskar is only nine years old this seems somewhat premature, and as Oskar points out, his problems are due to his father dying “the most horrible death anyone ever could invent” (201). The comedy at

Dr. Fein's expense continues when he introduces an association game, apparently with no rules:

"There are no wrong answers. How about safety?" "How about it?" "OK." "Yeah." "Bellybutton." "Bellybutton?" "Bellybutton." "I can't think of anything but bellybutton." Give it a try. Bellybutton." "Bellybutton doesn't make me think of anything." Dig deep." "In my bellybutton?" In your brain, Oskar." "Uh." "Bellybutton. Bellybutton." "Stomach anus?" "Good." "Bad." "No, I meant 'Good. You did good.'" "I did *well*." "Well." "Water." "Celebrate" "Ruff, ruff." "Was that a bark?" "Anyway." "OK. Great." "Yeah." "Dirty." "Bellybutton." "Uncomfortable." "Extremely." "Yellow." "The color of a yellow person's bellybutton." "Let's see if we can keep it to one word, though, OK?" "For a game with no rules, this game has a lot of rules." (202)

That this game is totally useless as a means of therapy is glaringly obvious, and Dr. Fein comes across as a clownish representative of his profession. The total failure of the therapy is declared almost bombastically towards the end of the session, as Oskar concludes that the only way to get better is to hide his feelings deep inside, and Dr. Fein asks whether anything good might come from his father's death. In a following conversation with Oskar's mom Dr. Fein reveals that he thinks Oskar is so ill he needs to be hospitalised. However, from the glimpse the reader has been given into his therapy room, it is clear that it is not Oskar who is ill. The therapy methods seem inane, a therapist and a society not willing to accept grief but bent on giving even terror a "positive twist" and for that matter a world in which 2752 people were killed in the attack on the World Trade Center seem utterly insane. Unlike his German namesake Oskar Matzerath from *The Tin Drum* who ends up in a sanatorium when realising the world has gone off its hinges, Oskar Schell does not lose his sanity. Mr. Fein's therapy sessions have, however, no part in Oskar's turn for the better.

In the two scenes mentioned so far the schlemiel role Oskar has occupied has had elements of the wise fool, thus he has been given the upper hand, at least morally, though dogged by unfortunate circumstances. There are affinities with the old schlemiel of the diaspora. He could be the butt of the joke, but admirable in his steadfast loyalty to basic principles of goodness, and likeable in his naïve outlook on the world: "The good-natured schlemiel also tended to affirm their moral, if not physical, superiority over their anti-Semitic persecutors" (Furman 174). Oskar is not oppressed by an anti-Semitic persecutor, but like the schlemiel of the shetl, he is able to disclose the shortcomings of the men of authority and the cruelty of the world he is living in. Oskar being a child leaves all the more room for exploiting the naïve gaze.

While Oskar definitely has aspects of the wise fool, he often just plays the traditional schlemiel part as the ridiculed, a 21st century version of Gimpel the Fool, foolish because he is so easy to take in and not devious enough to strike back. Fooling the gullible is irresistible.

Like Gimpel puts it: “When the pranksters and the leg-pullers found that I was easy to fool, every one of them tried his luck with me” (Singer 3). A nine year old with his own card presenting himself pretentiously as an “inventor, jewelry designer, jewelry fabricator, amateur entomologist, Francophile, vegan, origamist, pacifist, percussionist, amateur astronomer, computer consultant, amateur archaeologist, collector of: rare coins, butterflies that died natural deaths, miniature cacti, Beatles memorabilia, semiprecious stones, and other things” (99), is naturally targeted by bullies. In Oskar’s case the bully is called Jimmy Snyder. Oskar is the useful object of Snyder’s pranks. Asking Oskar to explain to class who Buckminster is, Oskar first presents all facts about the scientist and philosopher Richard Buckminster Fuller. When Jimmy specifies that he meant Oskar’s Buckminster, Oskar unwittingly states that Buckminster is his pussy and becomes the laughing stock of his peers. Oskar is unaware of what caused the mirth, but he realises it is a bad kind of laughter and that even the teacher laughs at him, although it does not show. During a school performance of Hamlet, in which Oskar plays the part of Yorick and Jimmy Hamlet, Oskar relishes in striking back:

ME. Alas, poor Hamlet [*I take JIMMY SNYDER’S face into my hand*]; I knew him Horatio.
 JIMMY SNYDER. But Yorick...you’re only... a skull.
 ME. So what? I don’t care. Screw you.
 JIMMY SNYDER. [*whispers*] This is not in the play. [*He looks for help from MRS.RIGLEY, who is in the front row, flipping through the script. She draws circles in the air with her right hand, which is the universal sign for “improvise”*]
 ME. I knew him, Horatio; a jerk of infinite stupidity, a most excellent masturbator in the second-floor boys’ bathroom – I have proof. Also, he’s dyslectic.
 [...] ME. You are guilty of having abused those less strong than you: of making the lives of nerds like me and Toothpaste and the Minch almost impossible, of imitating mental retards, of prank-calling people who get almost no phone calls anyway, of terrorizing domesticated animals and old people – who, by the way are smarter and more knowledgeable than you – of making fun of me just because I have a pussy...And I’ve seen you litter too.
 JIMMY SNYDER. I never prank-called any retards.
 ME. You were adopted.
 JIMMY SNYDER. [*Searches the audience for his parents.*]
 ME. And nobody loves you.
 JIMMY SNYDER. [*His eyes fill with tears.*]
 ME. And you have amyotrophic lateral sclerosis.
 JIMMY SNYDER. Huh?
 ME. On behalf of the dead... [*I pull the skull off my head. Even though it’s made of paper-maché it’s really hard. I smash it against JIMMY SNYDER’S head, and smash it again.* (145-146)

Of course this is all just wishful thinking, just like when he wanted to answer Dr. Fein’s question about whether anything good might come of the death of his father with “Of course not, you fucking asshole!” (203), but really just shrugged his shoulders. Oskar is unable get back at his tormentors. Again, to draw a parallel to Gimpel the Fool, Singer’s anti-hero suffers from similar inhibitions. When visited by a devil after the death of his wife, who has deceived him throughout their marriage and confessed on her deathbed that none of their children was actually his, he is tempted to give into the devil’s offer to get even with all those villagers who

had laughed at him throughout his life, but eventually he cannot bring himself to put urine in the dough, which is what the devil suggests. True to the characteristics of a schlemiel there is always a tragic element present in the description of Oskar, an element that was perhaps more elaborated by writers such as Bellow and Malamud than by Singer. Their fiction provides ample examples of people who are often reduced to a laughing stock but whose basic problem is their estrangement from community, unlike Gimpel, who may be scorned but is eventually always embraced by his villagers. There are traces of this alienated fool longing for connection in the Oskar who grapples with questions of mortality inside his paper-maché Yorick skull and senses that he is extremely alone. He has no real friend at school, and feels resentment towards his mom, to the point that he actually says he wishes she had died instead of his father, adding even more distance in his life.

So what relief is offered to Oskar by acting the schlemiel part? As a child Oskar does not have recourse to the self-deprecating humour seen in many literary schlemiels, Leo Gursky being one of them. What he shares with Leo and other schlemiels, though, is an extreme capacity for inventing. Throughout the novel the reader is presented ever new inventions like a teakettle that can whistle melodies and quote Shakespeare, or shower water with added chemicals that will make your skin change colour according to your mood, thereby solving the whole mind-body problem and helping you out when you are unsure about what you are feeling: “But with the special water, you could look at your orange hands and think, *I’m happy! That whole time I was actually happy! What a relief!*” (163). Oskar realises his wild imagination is some sort of escape mechanism, diverting him from thoughts that are too painful. He compares his urge for inventing with beavers cutting trees:

People think they cut down trees so they can build dams, but in reality it’s because their teeth never stop growing, and if they didn’t constantly file them down by cutting through all of those trees, their teeth would start to grow into their own faces, which would kill them. That’s how my brain was (36).

Viewed psychologically, Oskar’s inventing is maybe a misdirected attempt at dealing with the disconnection caused by his father’s death. The desperate urge to fantasise about new safety instalments reveals his anxieties: “Assurances of safety and protection are of the greatest importance. The survivor who is often in terror of being alone craves the simple presence of a sympathetic person. Having once experienced the sense of total isolation, the survivor is intensely aware of the fragility of all human connections in the face of danger” (Herman 61-62). The question is whether the inventing is a way of avoiding to confront his trauma or a cure for his anxiety, a sign of sickness or, to use Krauss’ words, “necessary lying to make up for the meanness of life”? The latter line of enquiry seems more in tune with the

schlemiel tradition and for that matter, the book at hand. Whereas it is clearly not healthy for a boy to invent all kinds of different deaths for his dad (in an elevator, crawling outside the building, jumping from a window), not knowing exactly how he died, much of his inventing transforms the grittiness of his life, which is the case with the alternative outcomes of the therapy session or the Hamlet performance. The novel also celebrates imagination on a more profound level. The fairy tale of the sixth borough is a tribute to dreaming. The imagined sixth borough was, according to Thomas Schell Jr., an island once so close to Manhattan that it was possible for the man with the world's long jump record to take a leap from Manhattan to the sixth borough, which he did once a year and "For those few moments that the jumper was in the air, every New Yorker felt capable of flight" (218). The sixth borough's gradual drift away from Manhattan symbolises a movement into adulthood; a leap into the dreamscape is no longer possible, but dreams and childhood innocence are not totally lost, for Central Park that was once part of the sixth borough was pulled over to Manhattan before the island receded for good.

The access to dreams, the fanciful imagination that has always made the schlemiel ridiculous, is Oskar's means of survival. Another tribute to imagination is provided by the fictional Stephen Hawking who after being bombarded with requests from Oskar for two years finally replies:

Albert Einstein, a hero of mine, once wrote, "Our situation is the following. We are standing in front of a closed box which we cannot open." I'm sure I don't have to tell you that the vast majority of the universe is composed of dark matter. The fragile balance depends on things we'll never be able to see, hear, smell, taste or touch. Life itself depends on them. What's real? Maybe those questions aren't the right questions to be asking. What does life depend on? I wish I had made things for life to depend on. What if you never stop inventing? Maybe you're not inventing at all. (305)

The negating of reality that is implied in the fairy tale and in Hawking's reply corresponds with the worldview of the schlemiel. It is a defence of a Gimpel the Fool approach to life, a refusal to succumb to cynicism. Though it is easy to rejoice in the praise of imagination, which in essence is a celebration of art, one should not lose sight of the black matter behind it all. The dreamer schlemiel's use of imagination can verge on the absurd. "Since the schlemiel is above all a reaction against the evil around him, he must invent more and more as the evil increases" (Wisse 69). When does imagination deteriorate into the three wise monkey's position of "see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil"?

Allowing myself a detour to another modern elaboration of the schlemiel, I will spend a few words on Nathan Englander's short story *The Tumblers* from the collection *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges* (2000). Drawing heavily on Singer's *Fools of Chelm* (1973);

(Chelm is the imaginary shetl of schlemiels in Singer's fiction), Englander puts the good-hearted nature of the schlemiel and his innocent distortion of reality to a test when he brings Holocaust to Chelm. Half of the villagers are put on a train destined for the death camp and the other half is taken to Germany to be a group of circus performers. Upon learning about the fate of the other Jews destined for elimination, the circus group concludes that they have no choice but to tumble, in other words to escape into art in the form of acrobatics, shutting their eyes to brutality. In this short story the foolishness of the schlemiel is not plainly laughable; there is a more sinister side to the schlemiel's imagination, since the gravity of the evil causes an almost total rejection of reality. One could argue that Oskar's wild imagination, his craving for fairy tales, is not simply an embellishment of reality, but a retreat from it. In that case his return to community that is implied towards the end of the book is more of an escape. The flipbook that concludes the novel can in this context be seen as evidence of such an escape. The falling man that Oskar has come to identify as his dad is suddenly flying instead of falling, as Oskar reverses the order of the pictures. In a psychological framework, this flight of the thought can be described as a type of avoidance strategy often seen in people suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. Herman, using George Orwell's term, calls it doublethink.

Doublethink means the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them. The person knows in which direction his memories must be altered; he therefore knows that he is playing tricks with reality; but by the exercise of doublethink he also satisfies himself that reality is not violated. (Herman 87)

His father's death has ripped Oskar away from the realm of childhood innocence like the sixth borough drifted away from New York, but the full impact of his personal loss and the bleak message of 9/11 per se are perhaps too much to accept if any belief system is to be retained. The solution is to let the "unreal", childish presumptions exist alongside the knowledge of evil. It might be escapism, but it is the kind of escapism the schlemiel stories of the Jewish tradition have always favoured. Singer's Gimpel the Fool was not unaware of evil; he just chose different stories. Did that make him a fool, or a clever survivor? Schlemiels seem to have assigned a mending project for themselves. According to Andrew Furman, they often affirm a central principle of Judaism, "*tikkun olam*: to repair or heal the world in preparation for the Messiah" (174), and this project will invariably cause them to "blunder in often humorous ways" (175). The fascination of the schlemiel lies in the tension between his buffoon qualities and the seriousness or desperation of his attempts at mending. Granted that one sees Oskar's inventing primarily as an escape strategy, are there any other ways to restore his beliefs? There is that unmerited and unforeseen gift of forgiveness, which in religious terminology is called grace, and which will be sought out in the next section.

The Garden of Eden - Redemption

The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the LORD God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die." (Genesis 1, 15-17)

When man breaks this first commandment, there is no way back to the Garden of Eden. The state of ignorant bliss is no longer obtainable. Life after Eden is one of divisions, between men and between God and men, of loss and death and the painful awareness of these facts. The myth of paradise remains, though, as does the yearning for it. For some of the characters in Foer's and Krauss' novels, the longing for paradise is excessive. Being unable to cope with harsh realities, imagining a time before the loss of innocence is a last resort. In *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* Grandma's last letter to Oskar includes a description of a reversal of events to return to a state without the inevitable losses: "In my dream, people apologized for things that were about to happen and lit candles by inhaling" (311). And her dream of reversals becomes more insistent as it descends into a mythological landscape:

My dream went all the way back to the beginning. The rain rose into the clouds, and the animals descended the ramp. Two by two. Two giraffes. Two spiders. Two goats. Two monkeys. Two snakes. Two elephants. The rain came after the rainbow. [...] At the end of my dream, Eve put the apple back on the branch. The tree went back into the ground. It became a sapling, which became a seed. God brought together the land and the water, evening and morning, something and nothing. He said, Let there be light. And there was darkness. (312-313)

The kind of bliss Grandma longs for ultimately requires a return to black matter, to the indistinctiveness before creation when there was no nothing or something. In a similar manner Oskar imagines a return to a state before the fall of the Twin Towers and his childhood innocence:

Dad would have left his messages backward, until the machine was empty; and the plane would've flown backward away from him, all the way to Boston. He would've taken the elevator to the street and pressed the button for the top floor. He would have walked backward to the subway, and the subway would've gone backward through the tunnel, back to our stop. (325-326)

His incantation of reversals is accompanied by the making of the flipbook that concludes the novel. Though there is denial in Oskar's and Grandma's game of rewinding, they are not necessarily unsuccessful at recovering from their trauma. Losing her family in the Dresden bombing deprived Grandma of a basic trust in life, and losing her son in 9/11 is a repeated instance of the original trauma, but she still chooses life. She fits well into the following description from Herman's book:

The survivor who has accomplished her recovery faces life with few illusions but often with gratitude. Her view of life may be tragic, but for that very reason she has learned to cherish

laughter. She has a clear sense of what is important and what is not. Having encountered evil, she knows how to cling to what is good. (213)

Grandma refuses to succumb to despair, insisting there is purpose after all. Taking refuge in a sort of comfort provided by the continuance of family lineage through Oskar, she desperately clings to her love for him, often shown through her ceaseless need for touching him. Oskar is pivotal in his Grandma's life.

When I looked at you my life made sense. Even the bad things made sense. They were necessary to make you possible. Alas. Your songs. My parents' lives made sense. My grandparents'. Even Anna's life. But I knew the truth, and that's why I was so sad. Every moment before this one depends on this one. Everything in the history of the world can be proven wrong in one moment. (232)

Her constant awareness of how things can be turned upside-down in an instant reveals that her safety issues are unresolved; in psychological terms, it can be named *hyperarousal*: "They do not have a normal baseline level of alert but relaxed attention. Instead they have an elevated baseline of arousal: their bodies are always on the alert for danger" (Herman 36). The same description applies to Oskar whose fear of public transport and elevators is verging on the neurotic. Many of his inventions speak of his shattered sense of safety. A stray thought about adding extra pockets to people's clothes, big enough to hold matches longer than usual to prevent burnt fingers, soon develops into a fantasy about pockets big enough to protect all and everything:

We need much bigger pockets, I thought as I lay in bed, counting off the seven minutes that it takes a normal person to fall asleep. We need enormous pockets, pockets big enough for our families, and our friends, and even the people who aren't on our lists, people we've never met but still want to protect. We need pockets for boroughs and for cities, a pocket that could hold the universe. (74)

What ultimately brings Oskar back, though he struggles to be reconciled with life's fragility, is forgiveness. In a religious sense, forgiveness is God's act of grace that makes a return to his presence possible. From man's fallen state after the expulsion from paradise, forgiveness is the only thing that brings him closer to the precincts of paradise. Strangely, it is the forgiveness given by an almost total stranger that makes possible any healing process for Oskar. As William Black forgives him for not having answered the call from his father on the worst day, some resolution is reached. The key has finally found its owner and Oskar's secret is unlocked. The force in the simple statement "I forgive you" makes it possible for Oskar to forgive himself and eventually his mother for not being there when he got the phone call. Being reconciled with oneself makes reconnection with the world possible, according to Herman:

By the third stage of recovery, the survivor has regained some capacity for appropriate trust. She can once again feel trust in others when that trust is warranted, she can withhold her trust when it is not warranted, and she knows how to distinguish between the two situations. She has also regained the ability to feel autonomous while remaining connected to others; she can maintain her own point of view and her own boundaries while respecting those of others. (205)

Grandma's dream of reversing events takes place as she is with her husband at the airport in one of the final scenes of the book. Her efforts to imagine a place without divisions is perhaps bred from an urge to save Thomas more than a need to comfort herself. There seems to be no return from exile for him. He is at the airport, having left his home again, but not really planning on going anywhere. He can only be in a state between things, in between either/or, between something and nothing. The divisions of life tattooed into his hands, *yes* and *no*, have become unbearable. In Malamud's *My Son the Murderer* a desperate father tells his non-committing son that "Nothing is nothing, it's better to live" (174). Thomas Schell would find it hard to agree. The airport is a haven for Thomas, as he can only be in the limbo it offers. It is a place without commitments or consequences. There is no demand to declare yourself, which is why Thomas laughed when he returned from Dresden and could pass through "nothing to declare". In fact, there is too much to declare, but he lacks the language for communicating it. So he remains the eternal wanderer without a definite destination. Interpreted in the framework of existentialism, Thomas is a man who has come face to face with the absurdity of life and realised its lack of inherent meaning. Whatever notions he had about religion, career, or love, these were destroyed in the Dresden bombing. The naïve, accepting tone of the brief note he wrote to Anna's sister a lifetime ago when she was collecting letters from everyone she knew, serves as a stark contrast to the old, sinister Thomas Schell:

To Anna's sweet little sister,
Here is the letter you asked for. I am almost two meters in height. My eyes are brown. I have been told that my hands are big. I want to be a sculptor, and I want to marry your sister. Those are my only dreams. I could write more, but that is all that matters.
Your friend,
Thomas (80)

In the void created by his loss of faith and encounter of existential angst, Thomas never manages to insert new values. He never ventures to the point of making real choices and of accepting commitment, and is thus rendered a victim of chance, as not making a choice also has its consequences. This shirking from choices that has characterised his life, through a marriage to which he was only partly committed and his rejection of fatherhood, is what in existentialist terms, has rendered him inauthentic. Thomas dreams about an existence without

the burden of consciousness, a mere being-in-itself released of the demands of a being-for-itself. For such a man only a return to a state before the discovery of free will is desirable:

...and tell me, what did thinking ever do for me, to what great place did thinking ever bring me? I think and I think and think, I've thought myself out of happiness one million times, but never once into it. "I" was the last word I was able to speak aloud, which is a terrible thing, but there it is, I would walk around the neighbourhood saying "I I I" (17)

The eventual loss of the word *I* clearly symbolises Thomas' denunciation of his identity. The task of reaffirming his ties to human community and thereby his beliefs is formidable; he prefers life in the airport environment. Paradoxically, the busy movement in the airport with all its coming and going makes Thomas' inner immobility bearable. The description of Thomas Schell calls to mind another fictional character, Abraham Katz in Daniel Stern's *After the War*. As with Thomas, war experiences have deprived Mr. Katz of all beliefs. He preserved his faith even though his friend Jake was blown to pieces, his wife Miriam killed during a pogrom in Vilna and his cousin was slaughtered by the Cossacks, but the suicide attempt of a young Jewish woman after the war, made him conclude that "there may as well be no God" (52). "The alternative to a universe ruled by God would be an all-encompassing *Tohu v'Vohu*, the great void, the nothingness that ruled before God created matter" (Codde 222). Another link between the two men is their lack of words. Mr. Katz is rendered speechless after the young woman succeeds in committing suicide, realising there is nothing to be said in a world without meaning. Only receding into the emptiness where choices need not be made and values have not yet been created is wanted by these men.

Still, Thomas' life may not be one of total resignation. His joint venture with Oskar, opening his son's empty grave and filling it with all the letters he never sent to him, can be interpreted as a means of obtaining redemption. But like his attempt at compensation through his home zoo, to make up for the animals killed in Dresden Zoo, this act is also futile and only potent on a symbolic level. Thomas' son, whom he never met, is dead and no communication is possible. The writing of letters that never get sent is seen in many novels by Jewish-American authors. Richard Stone in Daniel Stern's *After the War* writes letters to his father that are never mailed, Saul Bellow's Herzog spends much of his time writing letters to friends, family members and famous figures, but these letters never leave Herzog's house. Similarly, Jean in Norma Rosen's *Touching Evil* (1969) writes letters to Loftus, her absent lover, but they end up cluttering her desk (Codde 238). What to make of all this production of words that never reach a receiver? It certainly seems to undermine any notion one might have had about the possibilities for true communication, and as such these unsent letters also problematise the claim that language has restorative qualities.

From a psychological viewpoint, it is the prolonged nature of the original trauma that makes a return to human community impossible for Thomas Schell, and for Leo Gursky, one might add. Both have been placed in situations where survival was the only issue, to escape the firebombing of Dresden or hiding from the Nazis in the woods outside Slonim for three and a half years. Neither of them succeeds in dealing with the trauma, and instead they remain trapped inside troubling memories, which makes the trauma chronic:

But the features of post-traumatic stress disorder that become most exaggerated in chronically traumatized people are avoidance or constriction. When the victim has been reduced to a goal of simple survival, psychological constriction becomes an essential form of adaptation. This narrowing applies to every aspect of life – to relationships, activities, thoughts, memories, emotions, and even sensations. And while this constriction is adaptive in captivity, it also leads to a kind of atrophy in the psychological capacities that have been suppressed and to the overdevelopment of a solitary inner life. (Herman 87)

Due to the numbness created by the chronic trauma Thomas and Leo are more or less condemned to the life of a robot or a vegetable, and though they may long for the mere being in-itself released of the demanding consciousness, it is ultimately a dehumanising existence.

The unfulfilled lives of Leo Gursky and Thomas Schell may lead one to conclude that *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and *The History of Love* are rather novels of negativity than novels of commitment and affirmation, to use Philippe Codde's terminology, but the titles of the books themselves indicate this is not so. It seems to be a major point in both novels that even in the case of lost men like Leo and Thomas who seem forsaken by God or any benevolent forces, there are redeeming qualities. To follow up on the associations created by the titles, they both imply that there is some sort of commonality that unites. The history of love referred to in Krauss' book is something more than single love affairs or even the continuity of family. The ties between the individual and community can be more subtle, which is shown through Bird's unwittingly solving Alma's mystery and mitigating Leo's bitterness. Another unknowing act of grace is reported towards the end of *The History of Love*. Leo reminisces about the time he spent alone in the woods outside of Slonim during the war. Hiding in a potato cellar when two SS officers arrive, Leo is sure they will find him. However, one of the officers is obsessed with the idea that his wife is unfaithful to him, and distracts not only himself but also his fellow officer with his ranting. Consequently, Leo is saved by the Nazi's wife diverting her attention from her husband to another man. One may interpret it as the caprices of fate, but Leo sees a connection to the title of his first book.

The full title of Foer's book is never referred to in the novel itself, but parts of it occur repeatedly in situations somehow depicting the frail bonds between the individual and community. There are several scenes in the novel in which characters seem to have some sort

of epiphany combining the feeling of being terrifyingly alone with a feeling of being connected to larger whole, be it the universe, the community or the history of mankind itself. Oskar's imagined breakdown during the Hamlet performance starts with a sensation of being "incredibly close to everything in the universe, but also extremely alone" (145). Ironically, the scene that evolves mostly speaks of Oskar's separateness because he cannot communicate the anger he feels; he is shut off from the world inside his papier-mâché Yorick skull. There are still bonds, though. One of the many people named Black that Oskar has visited during his search for the lock to the key is in the audience, and he senses what Oskar feels, at least Oskar believes that is the case: "I looked out across the audience from underneath the skull, with Jimmy's hand under my chin. 'Alas, poor Yorick.' I saw Abe Black, and he saw me. I knew we were sharing something with our eyes, but I didn't know what, and I didn't know if it mattered." (147).

This feeling of connection is also what characterises Oskar's conversations via walkie-talkie with his grandmother who lives just across the street. Again, parts of the title are used to describe Grandma who "leaned her head out of the window and put her mouth incredibly close to the walkie-talkie, which made her voice sound fuzzy" (70). The urge to get close is also the thematic relevance of William Black calling for his wife, Abby, though this time the desired contact is harder to achieve because the couple is about to leave each other. Again a piece of the title crops up: "The man in the other room called again, this time extremely loudly, like he was desperate, but she didn't pay any attention, like she didn't hear it, or didn't care" (93). When it turns out that William holds the lock for the key and he and Oskar finally meet, they both marvel at the fact that they were incredibly close eight months ago without knowing they were looking for each other. What is foregrounded are the strange ways in which people's lives are entwined. A.R. Black who has chosen to shut off the world by turning off his hearing aids many years ago, reverses his decision when Oskar comes visiting and convinces him to turn them on again. He chooses to break his solipsism. There is obviously a symbolic aspect to him hearing the world again. Words from the title are included in the description of his return:

Then, out of nowhere, a flock of birds flew by the window, extremely fast and incredibly close. Maybe twenty of them. Maybe more. But they also seemed just like one bird, because somehow they all knew exactly what to do. Mr. Black grabbed at his ears and made a bunch of weird sounds. He started crying – not out of happiness, I could tell, but not out of sadness, either. (168)

The combination of the individual relating actively to the world and the flapping of bird's wings occurs in another version, too. When Grandma thinks about the joy of her friendship with her childhood friend Mary, there is another link to birds flying: "She jumped on her bed

for so many years that one afternoon, while I watched her jump, the seams burst. Feathers filled the small room. Our laughter kept the feathers in the air. I thought about birds. Could they fly if there wasn't someone, somewhere, laughing?" (78). What seems to be indicated is that the desired feeling of connection is a fleeting, fluttering experience that cannot be retained. There is frailty and movement involved, which the image of the birds elegantly conveys.

In a psychological jargon this feeling can be labelled "the experience of universality" (Herman 215). It has to do with realising on a profound level that you are not condemned to inner exile. Trauma victims "learn that their sense of self, of worth, of humanity, depends upon a feeling of connection to others" (Herman 214). Even when one has chosen to withdraw from society like A. R. Black, there are links: "The restoration of social bonds begins with the discovery that one is not alone" (Herman 215). Choosing a slightly different approach, one can view the epiphanies referred to as examples of restoration of belief through the magical. Andrew Furman identifies such a resort to magic in the writing of some contemporary Jewish authors, e.g. Steve Stern. In Stern's fiction angels appear and people climb trees and get lost in the dreams trapped in the branches. They seek "to transcend the brutish material world" (Furman 153), thus they never really lose faith. Whatever ruptures they have been subject to, connections are restored through the magical realm. Though Krauss' and Foer's novels do not leave the realistic world to the same extent as Stern's fiction, there are elements of magic in the descriptions of the experience of universality, e.g. the unlikely survival of Leo's book through war and flood and its interference in other people's lives, again affecting Leo. In *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* A.R Black's apartment has a surreal atmosphere with an archive with thousands of cards describing people with one word only, ("Tom Cruise: money" 157), and a gigantic bed into which he hammers a nail every day. The goal seems to be to leave behind the claims of realism. Scrutinising the story of how A.R. Black managed his daily life with the hearing aids turned off, you are left wondering how he could order all he needed on the telephone, not able to hear what was being said in the other end. Such questions are, however, rendered irrelevant in the magical setting.

Similarly, another character in Foer's book, Ruth, who has lived on the top of the Empire State Building ever since her husband died, seems to belong more to a magical than a realistic world. But as with the other examples of epiphanies mentioned here, the point of Ruth's story is also to describe a frail bond to the world. When her husband was still alive, he would strap a spotlight to the crate he dragged along as a door-to-door salesman, and from the

top of the tall building Ruth could see the light. Her feeling of universality, of being linked to the world, is still retained by her staying on the roof looking for that light. It seems to be suggested that it takes some magic to retain or restore belief. With some help of the magic wand then, Krauss' and Foer's novels become novels of affirmation. At least, the titles of the books and the events referred to hint at a kind of reality that somehow transcends the ordinary. There are obvious links here between the world of imagination so highly valued by the schlemiels and these epiphanies of connection, but it seems that in the latter case there are more forces than the individual's imagination at play. There is some kind of light pointing back.

So far the interpretations of the titles and the examples of how characters find redemption through a perceived universality seem to suggest there is a loophole out of inner exile. And again it is mainly Thomas Schell who disturbs the picture. Though *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* at large may be labelled a novel affirmation, Thomas Schell is not life-affirming. On the contrary, he cannot resign himself and remains confined in the airport limbo. His unresolved trauma encourages an alternative reading of the title. The book is dense with war references, the terror attacks on 9/11, the Hiroshima bombing, A.R. Black's account of decades of war that he has witnessed as a correspondent and, of course, the fire bombing of Dresden. What could be more extremely loud and incredibly close than the sound of bombs hitting, of terror striking:

- we heard a terrible noise, rapid, approaching explosions, like an applauding audience running toward us, then they were atop us, we were thrown to the corners, our cellar filled with fire and smoke, more powerful explosions, the walls lifted from the floor and separated just long enough to let light flood in before banging back to the ground, orange and blue explosions, violet and white, (210)

Though both *The History of Love* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* suggest ways by which the characters can be redeemed and retrieve meaning, the messages seem mixed and cannot be harmonised into one all-embracing idea. To borrow a phrase from Codde's description of Daniel Stern's *After the War* (1967), the novels seem to "leave its characters poised on the brink of connection and fellowship" (217).

Arrival

Now when Pharaoh let the people go, God did not
lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although it was nearer . . .
(Exodus 13:17).

Dreaming about arrival is the driving force behind the story of Exodus that Jews all over the world commemorate annually. The story of bondage in Egypt, of the avenging angel passing over the homes of Israelites, of bewildered wandering through the desert for forty years and the relief of reaching the destination is retold. The yearning to return home was finally fulfilled, though it was a long and devious route the Israelites had to follow. The Passover myth perfectly incorporates the images of exile and return. It is the Jewish myth par excellence. The reassuring image of homecoming is not given prominence over the lamentation of exile in this myth; in fact, the story derives its power more from the longing for a return than the return itself, and when Jews repeat the story year after year, it serves as a means of coming to terms with living in exile. There is not a total embrace of the homecoming image in the myth; for one, the leader of the Israelites, Moses, never arrives; he dies while watching the Promised Land from a distance.

In an analysis of Gerald Shapiro's *From Hunger* Andrew Furman makes a point of showing how the gone-astray Jewish protagonist Schrank finds a way back to his Jewish identity by accepting his own and his people's exile:

By the end of the story, Schrank triumphs by renouncing (implicitly at least) his wrongheaded assumption of a latecomer Jewish status. Specifically, he situates his own exile from Judaism within the larger context of Jewish exile that Jews acknowledge each year during the Passover Seder, especially in the phrase that concludes most Passover Seders; *Lashannah habbah birushalayim* (next year in Jerusalem). His own lament, "I'm so far away from home" merges with the exilic lament of the entire Jewish community at the Seder, "We are so far away from home... So far away from home. So far, so far, we are so far away from home" (*From Hunger* 83). (Furman 168)

What seem to be the thematic implications of the Passover myth are that it is a recognition of people's relative exile and a celebration of the longing for a final homecoming. This interpretation of the Passover myth can also serve as a description of the underlying themes of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and *The History of Love*. As the eighty pages or so of analysis in the preceding chapters have shown, the characters in Foer's and Krauss' novels cannot easily be framed by either the exile or the return image, but a combination of the two offers valuable insight.

Since it is time for making conclusions, I will allow myself to briefly comment on the characters' fates, restricting my concluding remarks to concern the old men and the young

protagonists. Thomas Schell is the character who seems the most trapped in exile. When the reader leaves him, he is at the airport, directionless, entering another “Walk in the Desert” from which he may not return. There are few redeeming qualities in his life except for, perhaps, an unstoppable need to communicate, which pierces even his muteness, and whatever comfort may be drawn from knowing he somehow lives on through his offspring. For the equally solipsistic and diasporic Leo there is not even such a feeble bond to community; the family lineage was destroyed with the death of his son. Still, there is continuation of his story if not through blood, then through his letters. His words live on and take on a life of their own, as they even inspire a couple to name their child Alma and the same Alma goes searching for ways to survive in the wild, or to make the Passover connection more explicit, to find ways to get through the desert. Words, both other’s and her own, play a vital role in Alma’s tentative recovery, as they do in Oskar’s life. Their attempts to reconnect are facilitated through their writing combined with restless walking through New York. There is consolation, it seems, in movement itself. Though they may not be granted the privilege of conclusive answers - the people Alma search for turn out to be dead or dying and Oskar’s key has little to do with his dad - they keep walking, or “keep looking” to use the words encircled by Thomas Schell Jr. in a *New York Times* article.

So how to conclude on the fates of these characters not entirely lost in exile and not entirely home and safe? Their stories seem to fit into that pattern of unresolved or only partly resolved plots so often found in Jewish-American literature. Victoria Aarons commenting on a short story by Grace Paley, *A Conversation with My Father*, claims “reconciliation is not closural; it is, in itself, a coming to terms with open-endedness, with choices for survival” (141). This description seems as fitting for Krauss’ and Foer’s stories as Paley’s. As much as this inconclusiveness may be unsettling, especially for a student writing a conclusion, it also makes sense if seen in the light of that larger Jewish exile myth:

The secret of the Jews in the years of exile was in having and not having: in having the memory and the promise of home *and* the freedom of the road, in cherishing home without having to defend it or even keep its roads free of potholes. Turning towards Jerusalem in prayer from whatever spot one inhabited, the Jew was reminded that the sacred center was somewhere *else*, it was *not-here*. (Ezrahi 236)

There is not plain tragedy in exile. The feeling of not being exactly where you should be creates a dynamic energy prompting the exiled to keep looking. Oskar’s coming home to his mother will not keep him safe indefinitely, and Alma’s satisfaction of solving a mystery and making discoveries about her identity will not provide her with steady ground for long. The longing back to some kind of origin, an axis mundi, which the Passover myth depicts, is

ultimately illusionary in both novels. I will borrow some words from Stuart Hall, who, though writing about questions of identity in post-colonial cultures and not addressing Jewish identity specifically, can still offer some insight into the Jewish craving for the Promised Land: “And yet this ‘return to the beginning’ is like the imaginary in Lacan – it can never be fulfilled nor requited, and hence is the beginning of the symbolic, of representation, the infinitely renewable source of desire, memory, myth, search, discovery...” (57). Hall’s point is that identity is not something to be retrieved, a stable entity just waiting to be rediscovered, rather it is always *becoming*, it is something that constantly must be recreated, not least through the stories we create about ourselves.

The trauma theory that has informed much of my analysis of *The History of Love* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* also emphasises the role of telling in the process of gaining a less fragile identity and recovering from trauma:

The major work of the second stage is accomplished, however, when the patient reclaims her own history and feels renewed hope and energy for engagement with life. Time starts to move again. When the “action of telling the story” has come to its conclusion, the traumatic experience truly belongs to the past. At this point, the survivor faces the task of rebuilding her life in the present and pursuing the aspirations for the future. (Herman 195)

Herman seems to imply a certain linearity in the development towards healing; the trauma is dealt with, the story is told, the terror can be described in the past tense and the victim is free to move on. This psychological discourse is strikingly more closural than the religious discourse. What the Passover myth tells us is that surmounting the feeling of exile and reclaiming a home is a task that must be performed over and over again, and on some level one must also admit that complete homecomings are only possible in an imagined world. In a metaphysical sense there will always be a distance that people long to overcome. Oskar Schell has processed his trauma through his notebook and by having both relatives and strangers recognise his loss. Nevertheless, the last act reported in the novel is that of Oskar reversing the pictures of the falling man, indicating his trauma or sense of loss will never be fully resolved. To recover from trauma, it is not as bombastically linear as has so far been suggested: “The reconstruction of the trauma is never entirely completed; new conflicts and challenges at each new stage of the lifecycle will inevitably reawaken the trauma and bring some new aspect of the experience to light” (Herman 195). Still, there is something about the different scopes of psychological theory and religious myths that makes the latter more circular and open-ended. A crude comparison can be illustrating, though I may risk simplifying matters too much: A trauma is inflicted by someone, it can be redressed, its causes can be explained, someone can be held responsible; the interpretative framework of

trauma theory is the human community. The religious myth, on the other hand, per definition places man in a metaphysical context, which naturally makes it more complicated to place guilt and find a definitive explanation. In this context the experience of loss is seen as inherent to life itself, a predicament humans constantly need to fight. Looking for ways to gain knowledge about the damaged selves of the characters in Krauss' and Foer's novels, who all try to overcome some traumatic experience, trauma theory has proved an invaluable source. It has provided tools for understanding and describing the characters' exile and their possibilities for recovery, but their inner world cannot be entirely encapsulated by psychological terminology. The imagery of myths, elusive in its lack of place and time but also lucid in its iconography, somehow captures the "grey areas" therapeutic language cannot reach into. And the perspective of myths never seems far away in these narratives where Alma's father cannot fight gravity and Oskar's father is identified by Oskar as the falling man, both images harkening back to the story of man's fall in Eden. Loss is inevitable, and those experiencing it must constantly strive to get out of their own Egypt.

Holding on to the Passover myth and its rituals, repeating the story of how the angel passed over Jewish homes entails a passing on of Jewish imagination and traditions. Andrew Furman claims one can often detect a "trajectory of rediscovery and repair (or t'shuvah)" (162) in contemporary Jewish-American fiction, since many of its modern protagonists seem to find relief by breaking their isolation and turning to a Jewish communal life. Such a pattern can certainly be observed in *The History of Love* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, seeing as the young protagonists make a turn for the better as they rediscover community, not a community specifically defined as Jewish, but the point here is the stress laid on the significance of communal life as such. Making a slight shift of focus, Foer's and Krauss' writing itself can also be seen as following such a trajectory of rediscovery. With their contributions, and those of other young Jewish-American authors, the corpus of Jewish-American fiction is not only added to, but the traditions of the past are redefined. The question is: How is Jewishness retained in these narratives? That biblical myths are persistent should be clear from my analysis of the books in the context of the exile and return image, which has its paramount expression in the Passover myth. By and large, the thematic undercurrent of the novels seems to spring from of a well of Jewish myths, be it the myth of paradise, man's fall or the tower of Babel. Moreover, the exile position, which due to history has come to permeate Jewish consciousness and self-image, is clearly a defining factor in the lives of the disconnected characters in Foer's and Krauss' books, making them appear as modern variants of Wandering Jews. The Jewish black humour, originating in the East-

European shetls, has also found its way into these two novels with their bungling schlemiels, who, in the attempt of mitigating their bleak situation or in even failing to try, generally make it worse.

In the end, there is, of course, no historical event more devastating or with a more massive impact on contemporary Jewish identity than the Holocaust. Though none of the novels can be called Holocaust novels in the sense of being books dealing specifically with the genocide, it seems fair to claim that the Holocaust's legacy of loss and terror can be traced in the stories about people marred by war experiences and deprivation of family, making them question the very tenets of life.

The novels' marked focus on alienation and loss connects them to the greater tradition of Jewish-American literature that has specialised in probing into the dissolving sanity and disillusionment of the despised outsider. It was the merit of the authors of the Jewish-American Renaissance in the 50s and 60s to move the theme of alienation beyond its Jewish connotations and give it metaphysical proportions, much due to the influence of French existentialism. This heritage is visible in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and *The History of Love*. The characters experience the bottom dropping out of their existence, putting them in the angst-ridden position of being forced to make life-altering choices without guidance, or shunning from choice altogether. Existential anguish was the subject matter of many books by Jewish-American authors in the post-war years, visible even in the titles of some of these novels, e.g. *Passage from Home* (1946) by Isaac Rosenfeld and *The Victim* (1947) by Saul Bellow. Interestingly, these novels, for all their existential modernity, inspired by the great thinkers of its time such as Sartre and Camus, contain solitary male figures who resemble the biblical Job, the epitome of alienation. Having lost everything in his life, he decides to "not keep silent; I will give voice to the anguish of my spirit; I will complain in the bitterness of my soul" (Job 7:11). This goes to prove how biblical references or associations are close at hand when entering the fiction of Jewish-American writers.

Depending on whether the alienated protagonists accept their fate like Job and reassert basic human values, or remain resentful and unengaged, post-war Jewish-American novels can be labelled either "novels of creation and commitment" or "novels of negativity and indifference" (Codde 125). According to Codde, there has been a "motion from negativity to commitment" (125). Though Krauss' and Foer's novels fall outside the scope of post-war novels, seeing as they write for a new millennium, one may still find the categories useful. When I claim that their novels come closer to "commitment" than "negativity", it is not because the fictional characters are ultimately "saved", as the above discussion on the

relativeness of exile and return illustrates; it is because behind the bleakness of some of the fates recounted there is “a voice of affirmation” (Codde 125). To recapitulate some of the plot elements speaking in such an affirmative voice: Oskar is offered redemption by being forgiven by a stranger and in fact, a wide range of strangers are involved and engaged in his looking for a way back home. Similarly, Leo is saved from the Nazis by an unknown woman’s love affair, and finally consolation is offered to him through meeting an unrelated girl outside the New York Zoo. These events all speak of a communal commitment. The emphasis on strangers in my examples is just to make clear how the relatedness between people is not restricted to family bonds.

Andrew Furman believes that the voice of affirmation is a typical trait of Jewish-American literature:

The inexorable urge to affirm the sanctity of human life amid countervailing influences, the mining out of redemptive possibilities across a seemingly irredeemable terrain, the search for the big answers through filial, often emotive memory rather than through book knowledge – these convictions and concerns, I would argue, are quintessentially Jewish. (120)

Victoria Aarons, another scholar commenting on the characteristics of Jewish-American fiction, focuses on different aspects:

the active reliance on a variety of forms of dialogue, the vocal qualities that suggest the mannerism and gesticulations of its “speakers”, diverse ironic structures, abrupt closures, dramatic monologues, irresolute endings, stories within stories, self-parody resulting in self-reflexivity, a complex humor, an artistic playfulness, and the immediacy and urgency of voice. (23)

Some of these characteristics are easily identified in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and *The History of Love*, such as “irresolute endings” and “complex humor” already touched upon in this conclusion. The Chinese box structure of adding new stories within the story is employed in both books with Leo’s first novel making guest appearances at regular intervals in *The History of Love* and Oskar’s journal being framed by his grandparents’ letters in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. The intermingling of voices that is a result of this structure seems based on an enduring Jewish interpretative tradition of continuous commentary upon commentary, as seen for instance in the Talmud.

Another keyword from Aarons’ quote that I would like to pick up on is *playfulness*. A well-developed sensitivity to language and a willingness to experiment with it, extending beyond the urge to tell a well-wrought story, seems to inform much Jewish-American fiction. As I have tried to show in Chapter 2, Krauss and Foer display much artistic playfulness in their dealings with language, challenging the margins of the text. The exploration of the limits of language even cause them to occasionally drop letters altogether in favour of graphics.

Unjewish as the flirtation with photography might appear, the experimentation with signs itself is decidedly Jewish, as Jewish culture has always sought for the multiple meanings of signs, a dedication that originally had religious overtones.

The Passover ritual reveals a deep-rooted belief in the power of language and the strength of storytelling. It is based on the obligation to retell a story of the past. During the Passover seder the youngest person present asks four questions, prompting the adults to explain why that night is different from all other nights. As new generations absorb the story, enabling them to pass it on to yet new generations, the old tale also becomes a part of their own identity formation. This pattern is discernable in the novels at hand where Alma's and Oskar's creation of narratives prove to have restorative effects. However, the novels have an ambiguous attitude towards language, and the same can be said about Jewish culture as such. In the wake of the Holocaust, there was debate on whether it was at all possible or desirable to describe its terror. Any narrativisation involves applying meaning and detecting a chain of cause and events. Facing something as contrary to reason as the Holocaust, "how can any narrative do anything but betray its subject" (Leak and Paizis 9)? This debate resonates in the novels, especially in the bewildering letters of Oskar's grandparents, proving how their war traumas are essentially incommunicable.

Ultimately, the Passover is about creating a link between past and present. This is how culture is preserved, a fact Jews are extremely aware of, being a culture that, for the most part, has existed without a homeland. Lacking a common geography to frame their lives, storytelling has taken its place. Consequently, memory is of the utmost importance in Jewish culture, for a person's memory contains not only personal experiences but the traces of historical events and old tales. As much as this is true of any culture, it is foregrounded in Jewish culture. Through memory, the dead can be honoured and their hopes and disappointments passed on. The past tends to play an important part in the Jewish-American novel, which can be exemplified by referring to a couple of contemporary texts. Melvin Jules Bukiet's *Stories of an Imaginary Childhood* (1991) "has been seen as Bukiet's artistic attempt to retrieve a world torn asunder by the Nazis" (Furman 43). In a short story called *Cattle Car Complex* (1996) Thane Rosenbaum shows how the claustrophobia experienced by the protagonist Posner's parents in the cattle car on their way to the death camp is transferred to their son, whose panic attack in a stuck elevator brings up "memories" from the past: "Posner had inherited the legacy of suffering from his parents" (Furman 65). Foer's first book revolved around a man who saved the memories of his grandfather's lost village by putting a fist of its soil in a zipper bag. Krauss' first novels explored the devastation of losing one's

memory. Their second novels are equally preoccupied with the past. Alma keeps lists of her parents memories passed on to her, which are surprisingly sensory and detailed like this memory from her father: “*hamesh* The sound of cards being shuffled by his mother and her friends when they played canasta on Saturday nights after Shabbat” (228). Oskar’s alienation after his father’s death is chained to his grandparents’ war traumas, originating in the bombing of Dresden, like a legacy of loss. And the memory of his father is retained through a fairy tale. I will let Aarons neatly summarise my point:

The weight of the past is measured by memory, by memory conceived through and framed by storytelling. Through storytelling, the developing tradition of American Jewish literature merges with the long tradition of Jewish writing, both biblical and secular, that depends on ordinary characters who talk their way to and through an understanding of ancestral history. (Aarons 170)

As my attempts at pinpointing the Jewish traits of the novels in my study should prove, there is no escaping the influence of ancestral history for Jonathan Safran Foer and Nicole Krauss. Fragments of a greater narrative, the Jewish tradition, keep seeping into their stories. The authors are aware of their connection to this heritage and that it has an impact on their writing. This can be illustrated by a quote from an interview journalist Gaby Wood had with Krauss in 2005:

I think it has something to do with - or everything to do with - the fact that my grandparents came from these places that we could never go back to, because they'd been lost. And people were lost. My great-grandparents and lots of great-uncles and aunts died in the Holocaust. I don't know; maybe it's something that's inherited in the blood, a sense of a loss of that thing and a longing for it. When the word nostalgia was coined in the 18th century, it was used to describe a pathology - not so much a sense of lost time, but a severe homesickness. (Krauss in interview with *The Observer*)

Foer seems to have been somewhat surprised to discover how much his writing was influenced by a Jewish sensibility when he published his first book. In an interview with Gathman in *The Austin Chronicle* in 2002, an interview with the revealing subtitle, *Jonathan Safran Foer's Unconscious Grasp of the Jewish Literary Tradition*, he said:

I think I'd been fed this in ways I wasn't aware of. I went to Hebrew school. I guess I heard my family at the table. I wasn't conscious of working within a Jewish tradition, but when I made a funny joke, I found myself telling a Jewish joke, and when I told a beautiful story, it turned out to be a Jewish story. (Foer in interview with *The Austin Chronicle*)

Just how much the authors’ Jewishness is at work on an unconscious or subconscious level and how much the Jewish features of their novels are premeditated is hard to say, but in hindsight, at least, they admit to the Jewish blood running through their literary veins, making an indelible print on their text. The persistence of the Jewish heritage was also acknowledged by the Jewish-American literary critic Leslie Fiedler, who, though thoroughly acculturated

and definitely secular, found himself adhering to Jewish rituals in his older days: “And each spring after dyeing the Easter eggs, I gather my family together for a Passover seder – crying out to the God in whom I do not think I believe...” (181). Philosophising about what to say if asked by his children to explain his irrational urge to celebrate the Passover seder, he concluded the most accurate answer would be: “Not because I believe, but so you should remember” (181). This devotedness to memory seems to be carried on through a new generation of writers invigorating the Jewish-American novel.

I started out this thesis by claiming there is a universal appeal in the motifs and themes of the Jewish tradition, and following the circular pattern of many Jewish stories, it is time to return to that point. The Jewish flavour of their literature has already been savoured, but how is the tension between particularism and universality solved in Foer’s and Krauss’ novels; what is the universal aspect of these Jewish narratives? The Jewish-American authors of the 50s and 60s made their leap into the mainstream by describing alienated characters, estranged by the demands of the modern society (to create one’s own meaningful universe in a society depleted of common values), more than their weak bond to Jewish community in itself. In the contemporary Jewish-American novel, exemplified by Foer and Krauss, alienation is still an important theme, and one that ensures universal appeal. However, these novels seem less inclined to trace alienation back to the ills of modern society and more inclined to fit the exile position into a mythical framework. Loss is the basic human experience after Eden; humans will never feel entirely at home. Nowhere is this diasporic condition made more apparent than in the novels’ discussion on language, and it is also this discussion that makes the novels distinctly contemporary with all its references to modern sign theory. The closeness people long for can simply not be obtained because distance is incorporated into language itself. Any phrase will defer from the thought or feeling harboured by the subject or the physical object it tries to capture, deriving its meaning only from its difference from other phrases. The entrapment of language, the deficiencies of communication deepen the estrangement between the characters in Foer’s and Krauss’ novels. The distance inherent in our sign system and the feeling of exile it fosters are paralleled in a number of biblical myths explaining how bliss was lost and immediacy became unreachable when man lost direct access to God. And these myths vibrate in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and *The History of Love*. But however much language can alienate a person from one’s lived reality due to its lack of directness, it is also language that liberates. So to remedy the feeling of homesickness the novels’ characters follow a roundabout way, looking for words that can represent their existence.

Finally, it is the Exodus story with Moses cast in the leading role that seems most apt to illustrate the novels' universal themes; Foer's and Krauss' narratives explore man's relative exile. As close as Moses was to arriving in Canaan in the end, it was still distant, attainable only through imagination.

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