

FOR ILLUMINATION AND ESCAPE: WRITING AND REGENERATION IN 21ST CENTURY JEWISH-AMERICAN LITERATURE

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In his book, *From Puritanism to Post-modernism*, Malcolm Bradbury has observed that “post[WWII] Jewish-American writing is generally marked by its concern with the historical, the moral, and the human anxieties of the modern self, and therefore has sometimes been described as displaying a return to realism in the contemporary American Novel.” (Bradbury 376). Others have noted that Holocaust fiction is generally “aesthetically restricted... by the moral privilege that must be accorded to historical fact.” (Behlman 2 of 10). However, the novels which form the focus of this article, Michael Chabon’s Pulitzer Prize winning bestseller, *The Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, published in 2000, and Jonathan Safran Foer’s novel, *Everything is Illuminated*, 2002, also a bestseller and the winner of the National Jewish Book Award in America, and the Guardian First Book Award in the UK, were written by relatively young Jewish-American novelists, (ages 26 and 36 at the time of composition) who are farther removed from the Holocaust, in terms both of geography and generation, than were their 20th century counterparts, and whose works reflect this difference. Both writers, I will argue, not only

refuse aesthetic restriction but also try to regenerate a faith in fiction which does not privilege historical fact, modifying literary realism for the 21st century.

Literary Realism connotes comprehensive detail, linearity, explicability, conclusiveness. Complex ethical choices often form the subject matter, and in her book *The Social Construction of American Realism*, Amy Kaplan examines how Realism assumes that the individual can redeem his/her social world, or vice versa. But beyond its belief in rational human agency and narrative closure, Realism as a mode of writing assumes itself to be both trustworthy and tangible, assumes that the world of the book is explicitly and intrinsically connected to the “real world” with an innocence and naivete that Postmodernism rejects, since one of the tenets of postmodernism is the sense that all realities are constituted fictions. But it is not only a belief in Truth or historical “realities,” that postmodernism eschews. Literary postmodernism generally eschews trust as well. In a 2003 article, “Realism, truth, and trust in Post-modern Perspective,” Ihab Hassan observed that it is not the question of “Truth” that defines Realism so much, but that of “Trust” instead.

Realism in art, he writes, is marked by “a fidelity to creation, a quality of attention to experience, [which] induc[es] trust” (3)...for “Mimesis embodies that classic faith...that the world is both real and representable.”(4) This need to trust is perhaps one of the reasons that Hassan ambivalently states “literary realism, though it may not suffice, remains indispensable...” (11). In this same vein, Bradbury observes that “we are no longer content with an innocent and confident realism,” however much we may miss it (392). Both Chabon and Foer reflect this kind of enlightened nostalgia, as their works seek to regain the trust that Hassan observes is so central to literary realism, but in a less naïve, more self-reflexive way.

Both works exhibit some postmodern, post-realistic characteristics, including hybridity and narrative indeterminacy, including comic books, folklore, magical realism, and pure fantasy into works that repeatedly displace the reader. Foer highlights historical indeterminacy with cunning reportage such as “It was March 18, 1791, when Trachim B’s double-axle wagon either did or did not pin him against the bottom of the Brod River.” (8). Chabon’s sudden historical discursives, including both real and fake informative footnotes, leave the reader almost as off balance as do Foer’s antics.

But other features of these works seem to harken back to Realism, its techniques, and assumptions. Foer’s book, written in the Epistolary style and blurring the lines between fact and fiction by giving the book’s main character his own name, reminds us of some of the techniques of Samuel Richardson. And, despite its intentionally untidy style, the book exhibits realist conclusiveness, as all the conflicts in the plot do become resolved. The main character finds a woman who is all that is left of Trachimbrod and his journey to the

Ukraine thus helps him connect with his family’s invisible history. Alex, his Ukrainian guide, gets the courage to eject his abusive father from the family home, to protect his younger brother. In other words, he acts in the redemptive manner Kaplan has found in so much American realist fiction. Further, Alex’s grandfather confronts and confesses to his own guilt in the Holocaust. While readers are left disturbed at witnessing cycles of violence and loss in the two families, the cycles seem clearly broken at the end. Chabon’s tale is suspiciously like the classic Horatio Alger story of the American Dream, as Josef Kavalier, a Czechoslovakian Jewish refugee, escapes to New York to meet up with his Brooklyn cousin, Sam Clayman, and makes a fortune drawing comic books. Chabon’s simultaneously archetypal and idiosyncratic characters have been compared to those of Charles Dickens, while his authorial tone has even been compared to Herman Melville’s discursive explanation of the history of Whaling in *Moby Dick* (Behlman 6 of 10). And, though the characters suffer much loss in the book, there is finally a happy ending for them all.

However, more than some suspiciously “realist” techniques, what really unifies these books is their nostalgia, their unavoidable attraction to the past, both historical and literary. The nostalgia that permeates these two best-selling, prizewinning books takes two forms: a longing for lost innocence, and an exploration of the power and relevance of art. They achieve this effect through the creation of innocent characters for whom Art is inextricably intertwined with reality, and through an implicit trust in the Healing, reconciling power of Art – a trust which infects the reader as well.

Both texts recall for their readers the innocence of youth. Chabon’s characters, Joe

and Sam, meet as teenagers, and Joe's naive belief in Sam's promise that creating their own comic book hero will make them "Big American Money" lead to their actually risking this seemingly impossible dream and succeeding. But their work is about far more than the money. For Joe Kavalier, the universe he creates in drawing his comic books is one in which he is empowered to do something about the Nazis. At one point he draws a full-color layout of Hitler being punched in the face by the comic-book hero who shares Joe's own real-life skill: Escape. For Joe is a trained escape artist, in the tradition of Harry Houdini, and the line between Joe and his character continually blurs. Though Joe realizes that he cannot literally hurt Hitler through his comic books, the novel does imply that his comics do have power to influence public opinion. At one point, his publisher threatens to pull the strip altogether unless Joe and Sam stop being so overtly political. However, it is their innocent self-confidence that saves their work, for, as their editor says "I have very little faith in the power of art, but I remember the flavor of that faith, if you will, from when I was your age, the taste of it on the back of my tongue." (286). When Joe answers, "I believe in the power of my imagination. I believe in the power of my art", his innocent confidence causes his hardened editor to betray the corporation that employs him and to give Sammy and Joe the means to win the battle to keep writing, to keep metaphorically breaking Hitler's nose in every issue. (286). Note that the scene emphasizes not The power of Art itself but the power of having Faith in Art – that Trust that Hassan says trumps even truth. The celebration of belief in the power of art is a leitmotif of the book, as the narrator muses upon the "energy of five hundred aging boys dreaming as hard as they could...transfiguring

their insecurities and delusions, their wishes and their doubts." (575). If we still have our belief in our power to imagine, to remake ourselves and our world, the book suggests, we create possibilities that might seem ludicrous in a world without that kind of trust. It is important to note, however, that in choosing a pre-WWII setting for this novel, something he had never done before in his fiction, Chabon was perhaps acknowledging that such innocence and hopefulness would strain our credulity were it situated in the late 20th century.

Foer emphasizes the motif of innocence as well. But, like Chabon, he cannot locate it in 21st century America. Instead, he uses his fictional Ukrainian co-narrator, Alex, to establish innocence and its ability to hope as conditions to be valued and, when lost, mourned. In the beginning of the novel, Alex tries to pretend to be experienced and worldly, but his real charm and insight stem from the fact that he is not the hardened, sophisticated character he at first pretends to be. But, later, after the journey they make together, he trusts Jonathan with the truth: "As I have mentioned, I often inform father that I will go to a famous nightclub, but then I go to the beach. I do not go to a famous nightclub so that I can deposit my currency in the cookie box for moving to America with little Igor." (144). Alex's innocent dreams of starting over in America with his little brother both charms Jonathan and hurts him, because, an American himself, Jonathan knows that the plane tickets Alex is saving for will not necessarily provide him with a happy ending. But Jonathan has dreams too, particularly about being born to be a writer; however, he doesn't express this in his own words, he distances himself from it by having the fictional Alex recall how Jonathan once told him that "if you have a good and meaningful dream you are obligated to search for it." (52). In both novels,

the motif of dreaming, of trusting in one's dreams, surfaces, but, because this activity seems almost too innocent to be believed, it is displaced through either time or space.

As well as valuing innocence – even though he displaces it – Foer's novel believes in the power of writing, as not only creation, but regeneration: "God is the original plagiarizer... the creation of man was an act of reflexive plagiarizing; God looted the mirror. When we plagiarize, we are likewise creating in the image and participating in the completion of creation." (210). For the next two pages, the book simply reiterates "We are writing." (212). After those pages, the next letter, from Alex to Jonathan, reads "We are talking now, Jonathan, together, and not apart. We are with each other, working on the same story, and I am certain that you can also feel it...Do you know that I am Alex and you are you and that I am you and you are me? Do you not comprehend that we can bring each other safety and peace?" (214) The "We" that is writing, the grandson of a Holocaust victim, and the grandson of a man who killed a Jewish friend during the Holocaust, have found out, that "in writing we have second chances" (144). Through the process, as the title implies, *Everything is Illuminated*. Not just for Jonathan the seeker, but for everyone who becomes part of the "we" that is writing.

If Art serves to illuminate for Foer, it serves as a vehicle to escape for Chabon. Interestingly enough, *The Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* begins when Joe smuggles the Jewish Golem out of Prague into Vilnius, escaping with it by hiding himself at its feet in a coffin. Jonathan Levi points out that the Golem, "a legendary clay figure said to have been created by a 16th century Rabbi to protect the Jews from their enemies....[has been] having something of a literary comeback [in American literature in the 21st century]." (2 of 2). For Chabon, and

perhaps for the other authors who have been invoking it lately, the Golem signifies a faith in the power of artistic creation (Levi 2 of 2). As does Foer's novel, Chabon's emphasizes Art's power to heal when, at the end of the novel, the reader discovers that Joe has secretly written a 2000+ page comic book based on the Golem legend, which is described as "The long and hallucinatory tale of a wayward, unnatural child, Josef Golem, that sacrificed itself to save and redeem the little lamplit world whose safety had been entrusted to it," going on to say "Joe came to feel that the work – telling the story, was helping to heal him." (577). But, in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, the power most celebrated is that of escape. One of the book's epigraphs is simply two words – "Wonderful Escape!". His characters agree: "The usual charge leveled at comic books, that they offered merely an easy escape from reality, seemed to Joe actually to be a powerful argument on their behalf. He had escaped, in his life, from ropes, chains, boxes, bags, and crates, from handcuffs and shackles, from countries and regimes...The escape from reality was, he felt...a worthy challenge." (575).

But both books, whatever confidence they place in art, refuse to be naive. Neither claims to really represent history or reality, but simply to escape it or illuminate it. This is not mere realism, but a new offspring of it; this is a realism that cannot promise Truth, but does offer readers the Trust Hassan claims is "indispensable", a new mode that promises to keep faith with the reader, not with the "real world." Both books argue that there are perfectly trustworthy "untruths" in their works. For instance, Alex writes to Jonathan to point out that a historical error in Jonathan's story does not mar his trust in it: "I do not think that there were these kinds of saws at

that time, but I trust you have a good purpose for your ignorance.” (142) Alex chides Jonathan later, too, “I would never command you to write a story that is as it occurred in the actual, but I would command you to make your story faithful.” (240). Chabon’s novel makes the same distinction, between the actual and the faithful, early in the novel, when Sammy consciously misrepresents a part of his past, claiming that an old fascination with Harry Houdini had inspired the Escapist, the comic book character that made his fortune: “The Truth was, that, as a kid, Sammy only had a casual interest, at best, in Harry Houdini... Yet the account of his role...like all of his best fabrications, rang true. His dreams had always been Houdiniesque...” (3). Thus, in these stories, the faithful, not the mere actual, is Realism enough, and we can trust it, because it has the power – for Chabon, to escape, for Foer, to illuminate: for both authors, to heal.

Even the pain of losing your family in the Holocaust, as Joe does in *The Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, or the pain of having participated in the killing, as Alex’s grandfather, in *Everything is Illuminated* has.

Critic William Spanos has observed that postmodern readers view the “rigid, deterministic plot of the well-made [realist] fiction ... as having its source in bad faith.” (*Post-modernism* 78). Chabon and Foer, however, use their works to restore to readers a good-faith in art’s regenerative power to relieve suffering and move us toward a greater understanding: not through rigidity or determinism, but through the use of the “well-made fiction” as *Escape*, or *Illumination*. This suggests the possibility of a new realism for the 21st century, a self-reflexive realism that eschews the naivete of claims to Truth, but still embraces the possibility of Trust: a realism not of the actual, but of the faithful.

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