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Unmasking Meaning: The Failure of Existential Quests in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of Codes*

Juan Pablo Vilches¹

The present article deals with the existential issues in Jonathan Safran Foer's 2010 novel *Tree of Codes* as masks that pervade the understanding of human existence and are bound to fail. It analyzes how Foer's work undermines these existential concerns through its narrative and through its particular format (a die-cut surface full of negative spaces) following Heidegger's phenomenological idea of Dasein and Wittgenstein's philosophy of language. Within the apocalyptic context of the novel, thought and reflection become forms of disengagement and turn into physical masks that disintegrate along with the characters when they are confronted with death. Moreover, language proves to be an insufficient means of comprehension as it disintegrates through the pages and gives place to silence as an answer. Thus, *Tree of Codes*'s narrative progression and its particular physical configuration prove that reflection and language are masks that are bound to fail in the task of understanding existence.

KEY WORDS: existentialism, Jonathan Safran Foer, disengagement, language, silence

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Tree of Codes by Jonathan Safran Foer is a reworking of the 1957 translation of Bruno Schulz's collection of short stories, *The Street of Crocodiles*, originally published in Polish in 1934. Published in 2010, Foer's novel has been considered revolutionary due to its particular format that presents pages with cut outs that evidence the process of carving out Schulz's original words that gave origin to Foer's narration. *Tree of Codes* can be thus described as an objet d'art or artifact in which the textual art of literature converges with the plastic art of sculpture to produce an intimate relation between form and content.

Through the voice of an unnamed narrator, *Tree of Codes* recollects the impressions of the last days of existence of a town that awaits an unknown catastrophe. Within this apocalyptic setting, the inhabitants of the town are immersed in a desperate search for existential meaning as they see the end approaching. However, their quest fails due to their misunderstanding of human nature and the resistance towards the possibility of death, which leads them to rely on thought and reflection as means of comprehension. Thus, instead of becoming active participants of their existence by engaging with the world that surrounds them, they lose all meaningful connection to it. Furthermore, the sculptural dimension of *Tree of Codes* destabilizes language by presenting it as a fragile structure that results unsuitable for existential questions, enhancing the failure of the characters to embody meaning and undermining the reflective approach that allows them to formulate such existential concerns. Then, through its narrative and format, *Tree of Codes* explores the different layers or screens that pervade the characters' understanding of existence in order to expose their fragility and to prove that ultimately they are all bound to fail.

This study will set its foundations on two of the most prominent philosophers of the 20th century: Martin Heidegger and Ludwig Wittgenstein. On the one hand, concepts from Heidegger's seminal work *Being and Time* along with scholarly commentary by Mark Wrathall will be used to address the existential crises that the characters of *Tree of Codes* go through and their subsequent failure to achieve meaning. On the other hand, Wittgenstein's reflections on language present in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and his later re-working of them included in *Philosophical Investigations* will be used to analyze the process of formulation and codification in relation to the format of the book. Also, commentary on the work of Heidegger and Wittgenstein by Lee Braver in his book *Groundless Grounds: A Study of Wittgenstein and Heidegger* will serve for the theoretical approach of this study.

Although *Tree of Codes*'s narrative unfolding is quite obscure due to the restrictions that come from working with another text as a canvas, from its first pages, Foer's artifact showcases a

rich poetical apocalyptic imagery; sinking houses and gardens that turn in their sleep act as the signs that announce the imminent end (Foer 10-13). Contrary to that first image, the town described prior to the announcement of the catastrophe is one that sinks in the tedium of everydayness. As the narrator recalls: “days came and went, everyday events melted, spreading uniformly over the city” (123-124), shaping the endless pattern of routine that drives the inhabitants to the lethargic state of boredom and monotony that results from their being “fed up with the old familiar order” (129). There is in the narrator’s description a sense of existential anxiety and the need to find meaning against the backdrop of weariness that the town offers. Thus, the narrator adds: “we all sensed the coarse trick, [y]et, we wanted human feeling, gestures free from suspicion, some sympathetic if stammering articulation, half syllables of mystification, a temporary eternal” (125-126).

The inhabitants of the town perceive the monotony that has spread over their town as a trick, a deceitful hoax played upon them in order to hide something more important that can provide the sense of mystification and eternity that they crave. Although they are not satisfied with the constancy of the routine that spreads over their surroundings, for Heidegger it is precisely within the realm of everyday events where human beings come into full realization and, therefore, are able to embody meaning. In his seminal work *Being and Time*, Heidegger develops the phenomenological notion of ‘Dasein’ to refer to the kind of entities human beings are. The German word translates into ‘Being-there’ or ‘Being-in-the-world’, which makes manifest the primary premise of his philosophical approach: the existence of human beings is always bound to a ‘there’, “a place in which it understands how to comport itself, and within which it has meaningful relationships to other entities” (Wrathall 11). The circumstantial elements that surround Dasein become crucial for its meaningful existence. However, in their desire for a disruption of the structure of everyday events, the characters “shut [their] eyes to the almost unbearable ordinariness” (Foer 127), which puts the relationship with their surroundings at risk, and in doing so, their capacity to lead a meaningful existence as well.

Within this atmosphere, the news of the upcoming tragedy comes to bring a newfound excitement among the inhabitants, since: “this was a simply incredible chance, an honorable end. People discussed it with enthusiasm. Something had entered our lives. An importance permeated our sighs” (Foer 130-131). The catastrophe becomes the disruption that they long for. At the same time, it leads the inhabitants to place themselves in a new realm, one that seems to be beyond the common everydayness that they disdain. This endows them with a new feeling of ‘importance’ that becomes their source for existential meaning. They live for the upcoming ending, but they live for it

with the hopes of being an important part of its occurrence, as if the catastrophe that awaits them provided an alternative to the monotony to which they have been condemned. However, this sense of importance reflects one of the main failures in the understanding of human nature that results from the misconceptions that have shaped the activity of traditional Western philosophy and that Heidegger discusses in *Being and Time*. As Lee Braver recapitulates: “one of the unsettling facts about us is that we have not been favored with a special role, a task given us by reality or God, whose approval would demonstrate that we’re not just muddling through but doing something important” (78). Upon the upcoming arrival of the end, the characters rest in this false prospect of importance in order to fight the sense of weariness of the routine of everyday events.

This sense of importance or of something beyond the ordinary that has been put forward by traditional Western philosophy tends to separate the ‘self’—or in Heidegger’s terms, our ‘Being’—from the ‘world’ in which it exists so as to place it within a transcendental axis² that allows for a leveling up with the idea of an important purpose assigned to human beings. The problem with this approach is that it derives in what Heidegger understands as a disengaged relationship with the world in which thought and reflection take a predominant role over active interaction, disregarding the importance of the circumstances in which Dasein exists in connection to other entities. As Lee Braver explains, “upon halting an activity to stare, the richly meaningful, interconnected world we live and act in recedes, leaving behind beached inert, present-at-hand objects” (31), which are substances “independent of other entities” and whose properties “remain the same across time” (27). Thus, the new feeling of importance that permeates the characters after the announcement of the end along with their desire for mystification and a temporary eternal reveal the nature of their existential quest: one that aims for transcendence and in which existence is considered a “present-at-hand” object, singled out from the contextual elements that define it. The transcendental nature of their existential pursuit is better illustrated through the narrator’s father. Although his relation to the

² For example, Rene Descartes’ famous proposition from his *Discourse on Method* “I think, hence I am” argues for a metaphysical subject that is prone to doubt everything but its own existence. As Descartes himself puts it: “I attentively examined what I was, and as I observed that I could suppose that I had no body, and that there was no world nor any place in which I might be; but that I could not therefore suppose that I was not” (666). Descartes’ reasoning differs radically from Heidegger’s phenomenological method. The former disregards the contingency and the importance of direct experience in the making of philosophy that the latter sets as the foundations for his approach. By disassociating human beings from a body and a place to exist, Descartes puts forward the idea of an essential subject that, due to its thinking nature, can be located in a metaphysical realm that distances itself from the immediate and contingent circumstances. Traditional Western philosophy perpetuated Descartes’ vision until Husserl’s school of phenomenology appeared during the first years of the 20th century to center the activity of philosophy on experience.

upcoming catastrophe is rather vague and never clearly depicted in the narrative of the novel, the narrator's account does reveal an existential anxiety with transcendental concerns underlying his father's views on life. The narrator recalls how his father taught him: "[t]here is no dead matter' ... 'lifelessness is only a disguise" (49-50). His reflections unveil how existence is seen as a present-at-hand object that is able to transcend any possible end as it is considered something that remains despite the external circumstances to which it is submitted and, very much like the townspeople consider the boredom that permeated the city to be a deceitful trick, lifelessness is seen as a disguise that veils the transcendental nature of human beings, since dead matter does not exist.

Contrary to the views held by the narrator's father, for Heidegger the disguise is not lifelessness but the belief in the possibility of transcendence of human beings. At the root of this belief, there is an underlying denial of death, which unveils an existential fear towards this possibility that is a crucial component in the correct embodiment of Dasein's meaning. According to Heidegger, "Dasein, as thrown Being-in-the-world, has in every case already been delivered over to its death" and besides 'Being-in-the-world', Dasein is also 'Being-towards-death' (Heidegger 303). Coming to terms with this possibility, accepting that it is one not to be outstripped (308), is what allows Dasein to take responsibility for itself (Wrathall 69). Still, Heidegger recognizes that death is always a source of anxiety for Dasein, since it brings to the foreground the fact that "our ways of organizing the world are contingent, and ultimately not grounded in anything timeless and essential" (61). The anxiety that comes from this realization is reflected in the narrator's father's existential concerns that ponder the nature of human life: "'[w]e are not' ... 'long-term beings. [N]ot heroes of romances in many volumes ... We openly admit: our creations will be temporary ... We shall have this as our aim: a gesture. 'Can you understand ... the deep meaning of that weakness?' [I]he proof of our life. We love each gesture" (Foer 51-52). Existence is reduced to gestures that, ruled by their fleeting nature, do not underlie any higher or transcendental implications. For the narrator's father, this ephemeral quality of existence comes to be a 'weakness' and a limitation for human beings and this leads him to an existential fear over the seeming meaninglessness of our Being, instead of acting as the enabling possibility that Heidegger considers Dasein's finitude to be. Following Heidegger's approach, the belief in transcendence sustained by the narrator's father—and the townspeople as well—brings a failure of meaning, since the idea of another metaphysical realm and the denial and fear of death leads the father to withdraw from his immediate circumstances and disengage from his own existence. The narrator recalls how his father seemed to "plunge deeper beyond [their] understanding" (33), "outside of the surface of life" (38), "and with flushes on his cheeks [he] did

not notice us anymore” (33). Thus, in the search for a transcendental anchor, his father loses all connection to what surrounds him—his son and his wife—and that makes him Being-in-the-world and he is unable to embody his Being as Dasein meaningfully as he comes to reside outside of the margins that delimit the possible space for meaningful interactions; these interactions and Dasein’s meaningful unfolding depend on our understanding and acceptance of our potentiality for death.

The fear of death that permeates the characters and that drives them through their transcendental quest results precisely from Dasein’s quality of Being-there in relation to other entities. According to Heidegger, in Being-there, Dasein is also ‘Being-with’ or ‘Being-alongside’, since the world in which it unfolds is one shared with others (155). Although for him this is a defining characteristic of Dasein’s nature, it always presupposes the risk of yielding to what he calls “the dictatorship of the they” (164), which tends to “[dissolve] one’s own Dasein completely into the kind of being of ‘the others’ in such a way, indeed, that the others, as distinguishable and explicit, vanish more and more” (164). This results into the indistinguishable mass that he names after the German indefinite pronoun ‘das Man’, which translates into the English “they” or “the one” (Wrathall 52). Their fear of death and their desire to transcend leads the characters in *Tree of Codes* to wear masks throughout the novel. As the opening lines present: “everybody [wears] his mask. Children greet each other with masks painted on their faces; they smile at each other’s smiles growing in this emptiness, wanting to resemble the reflections, whole generations had fallen asleep” (Foer 8-9). As means of concealment, which hides any distinctive feature, the masks transform the inhabitants of the town into an indistinguishable crowd that works as an allegory of Heidegger’s notion of the ‘they’. However, the masks also reveal a sense of disburdening that is very much connected to the notion of the ‘they’. As Wrathall comments, disburdening entails the “willingness to accept the judgment of others, thereby freeing ourselves from the need to take responsibility for the decisions we make” (56). The masks do conceal the children’s individuality but they also reveal the characters’ desire to let go of any sense of responsibility over their own Beings as they aim to resemble a model that lacks authenticity and that rests upon a sense of emptiness and lethargy.

Furthermore, Heidegger also establishes a relation between the ‘they’ and Dasein’s comportment towards death by commenting that: “[t]he ‘they’ concerns itself with transforming [the] anxiety [over death] into fear in the face of an oncoming event” (Heidegger 298). Under this view, the masks that tie the crowd together and transform it into the ‘they’ could be said to respond to the character’s fear of death and act as a means of protection against the upcoming catastrophe. This reading could be taken further and render the masks as a form of disengagement as well, since

they separate the crowd from its direct experience of the world in which they live, so they only interact with it through the lens of the masks that, in their concealing nature, obscure matters and allow for fear to settle in. The narrator's father embodies this fear as he stands indistinguishable among the crowd, hidden behind his own mask, "[r]efusing all food and drink. [N]o human could bear such a tragic mask ... Instead of fighting he subjected to the fear and sadness" (Foer 99-100). By blending into the masked mass, the narrator's father does not only subjects to the fear of death, but he also renounces to any possibility of individualization, since for Heidegger, death is Dasein's only possibility to "[wrench] ... away from the "they"" (Wrathall 69-70), due to the fact that within its Being-with or Being-alongside, death is the only non-relational possibility that "individualizes Dasein down to itself" (Heidegger 307). The narrator's father is thus condemned to a meaningless existence and as the narrator accounts: "knot by knot he loosened himself, as unremarked as the gray heap swept into the corner, waiting to be taken" (Foer 34). The narrator compares his father to a pile of gray heap in order to acknowledge his failure to meaningfully embody meaning as Dasein and to recognize the unremarkable quality his existence acquires as a consequence of the fear entailed by the possibility of death.

It is not only the narrator's father that fails in the attempt to achieve a meaningful existence, but also the rests of the townspeople, for the mask they wear fail as well. The ideal of transcendence that renders existence as a present-at-hand object and that underlies the intention to escape Dasein's defining finite nature reveals the townspeople's giving in to and their becoming the 'they', making of any attempt to achieve meaning something impossible. After more than a year of expectation, the disaster makes its way through the town, spreading: "darkness in [the] city ... [T]he gale seemed to explode dead colors onto the unkempt sky. [U]nable to hold any longer the powerful breath houses howled. Trees stood with their arms upraised and screamed and screamed ... The whole world suddenly began to wilt and blacken" (Foer 102, 104, 113). When the catastrophe finally arrives, they are all condemned to die meaningless deaths. The narrator describes how "[p]eople fled but the disease caught up with them and spread in a dark rash. Their faces disappeared. They continued, now featureless, shedding as they walked one mask after another" (113-114). On the day of the catastrophe, the masks worn by the inhabitants showcase their own fragility and disintegrate. However, as they have become painted to the inhabitants' faces as the opening image of the novel states, they have nothing to conceal anymore. Their disintegration reveals featureless creatures, an extreme expression's of Heidegger's understanding of the 'they', whose fear of death has led them to die as inauthentic beings without any possibility of individualization, while "everything [disintegrates]

into that silent infinite” (114). The circumstances of the final deaths of the townspeople ultimately reveal how all the masks they developed for the understanding of the nature of their existence are bound to recede, since although Dasein lives in a world shared with others: “all being-with others, will fail us when our own most potentiality-for-being”—death—“is at issue” (Wrathall 69). Even though the nature of death forces the characters out of the ‘they’ and the shared convention of disengagement that kept them together, they still die as unremarkable beings—very much like the narrator’s father—without any distinctive features which renders their existence as meaningless according to the parameters established by Heidegger’s phenomenological philosophy.

If for Heidegger the problem of existential meaning comes from the disengagement that results from the desire to comprehend the nature of our Being-in-the-world through a present-at-hand approach, for Wittgenstein the problem rests on similar grounds but he places the emphasis on the structures of language that allow for the reflections that follow a present-at-hand mode and “the illusion of profound enigmas hidden in their depths” (Braver 50). As it was illustrated through the narrator’s father, he devoted more time to thinking about existence instead of actively engaging with it. His existential anxiety and the reflections that it gives rise to find their way through linguistic formulation as an intended means for comprehension (This is also seen in the characters’ desire for transcendence that is expressed in their need for “half syllables of mystification” (Foer 126), which reveals a reliance on language that recalls the “Platonic view of meaning as contained within a rule, a word or thought that remains constant regardless of changes in context or application” (Braver 10, emphasis added)). In *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*, published only a couple of years before Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, Wittgenstein considers the primary function of language to be describing the state of affairs in the world; that is to say, the role of language is to “assert or deny the existence of a precisely circumscribed piece of the world” (19). However, for Wittgenstein, in its activity, traditional Western philosophy has condemned language to several obscurities. He compares language to loose apparels that make it impossible to distinguish the figure that they clothe and he claims: “language disguises the thought; so that from the external form of the clothes one cannot infer the form of the thought they clothe, because the external form of the clothes is constructed with quite another object than to let the form of the body be recognized” (Wittgenstein 45). For him, instead of unveiling the true nature of the set of elements that shape our experience of the world, language as a means of representation tends to conceal—in similar fashion to the masks worn by the characters of *Tree of Codes*—the experience itself and its structure. Thus, the primary

objective of Wittgenstein's work is to dismantle the structures of language in order to arrive to one that shows itself and needs not be spoken so as to avoid obscurities.

The very title of Foer's work points to the problem of language as a disguise discussed by Wittgenstein as it addresses the issue of codification. The tree of codes is a physical presence within the town and that could be regarded as the embodiment of language. In his account, the narrator recalls a map of the city owned by his father that depicts the tree of codes and its role within the town:

My father kept in his desk a beautiful map of our city, an enormous panorama.

The city rose towards the center of the map, honeycombed streets, half a street, a gap between houses. [T]hat tree of codes shone with the empty unexplored ... we find ourselves part of the tree of codes ... the city is reduced to the tree of codes.

(Foer 88, 92, 94; emphasis added).

The tree of codes is depicted as the root to which everything goes back. It could be said then, in the light of Wittgenstein's reflections, that within the catastrophic and existential context that Tree of Codes presents, language traces the contours of the problem of the characters to formulate meaning, for everything in the town is reduced to the tree of codes. However, the map destabilizes itself and as a sign to be decoded symbolizes the impossibility of language to capture the true nature of what it tries to represent. As the narrator comments: "Only a few people noticed the lack of color, as in black and white photographs. This was rather real than metaphorical—a colorless sky, an enormous geometry of emptiness, a watery anonymous gray which did not throw shadows and did not stress anything, a screen placed to hide the true meaning of things" (90-91, emphasis added). The narrator acknowledges the map as a screen that hides the territory being represented instead of uncovering it. The screen renders said space as a vacuum and superficial geography where the elements that compose it become indistinguishable and blend into the 'anonymous grey,' enhancing the deficiencies of language as a reliable means of representation. The map thus embodies the lose apparel to which Wittgenstein equals language. Lee Braver discusses Wittgenstein's reflections through the concept of Retrospective Rational Reconstructions (RRR), which is defined as the attempt to grasp reality and explain phenomena afterwards through linguistic formulation (32). The concept of RRR brings together Wittgenstein's notions of the ill use of language that constitutes the substratum of philosophy and the problem of present-at-hand objects put forward by Heidegger, since according to Braver "[p]resence-at-hand has an intrinsic tendency to retrospectively interpret experience" (30). It is in the interpretation of experience where language becomes the veil that

replaces the active engagement with it by signs that lead to a present-at-hand mode that ultimately results in the incorrect perception of the colorlessness and emptiness of life that the narrator describes and that resonates with the initial monotony and lethargy that the townspeople disdain.

Although *Tree of Codes* acknowledges the failures that come from a present-at-hand approach to existence and from Retrospective Rational Reconstructions through the meaningless deaths of the townspeople, the fact that it deals with these existential matters using language poses a contradiction. The very existence of *Tree of Codes* as a discourse of existential anxiety would also constitute a failure, for it would entail a present-at-hand approach as well. However, the format and plastic dimension of the book undermines this possibility as it echoes Wittgenstein's early philosophical ideas. Visual Editions, the publishing house responsible for the publication of *Tree of Codes*, has described it as much as a "sculptural object as it is a work of masterful storytelling" ("Visual Editions: *Tree of Codes*"). Similar to the kind of sculptures that result from the subtraction of material, *Tree of Codes* is carved out of the English translation of Bruno Schulz's collection of short stories *The Street of Crocodiles*.³ Foer's book was manufactured using the die-cutting technique, which consists of cutting any thin flat material into specific shapes using a steel cutting die. The final objet d'art presents a perforated surface in which the pages contain no more than 35 words each and all of them hang delicately from what remains of the page that was cut (See Fig. 1). As an online review in *The Guardian* points out: "as an artefact, the most remarkable thing about *Tree of Codes* is how very fragile it is ... [T]he book's lack of a tough shell makes it seem all the more vulnerable to mutilation" (Faber, "*Tree of Codes* by Jonathan Safran Foer – Review"). Beyond the delicacy and fragility that *Tree of Codes* showcases in its format, there is, behind Jonathan Safran Foer's creative exercise a sense of destruction that resonates with the apocalyptic setting the narrative puts forward. Foer eliminates most of Schulz' original words—or those of the English translation—and reduces language to a minimum. Entire paragraphs are reduced to mere sentences as in the case of the original

[o]nly now do I understand the lonely hero who alone had waged war against the fathomless, elemental boredom that strangles the city. Without any support, without recognition on our part, that strangest men was defending the lost cause of poetry. He was like a magic mill, into the hoppers of which the bran of empty

³ The title of Foer's novel also results from a process of subtraction. By removing certain letters from the title of the English translation, *The Street of Crocodiles* becomes *Tree of Codes*.

hours was poured, to re-emerge flowering in all colors and scents of Oriental spices. (Schulz 51)

that becomes “[o]nly now do I understand the war against boredom, the lost cause of empty hours” (Foer 41). The results in the pages full of negative spaces that his final artwork presents.

In *Tree of Codes*, there is a sense of language vanishing and dematerializing through the pages, as if the words that survived the cutting process were the remnants of a catastrophe. To an extent, this process of carving out and erasing words mirrors Wittgenstein’s concerns with the structures and disguises of language. The attempt of *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* is to dissolve all previous and future philosophical activity by demonstrating that “[m]any traditional problems do not get solved but dissolved when they are shown not to be real problems in the first place” (Braver 15-16). Thus, the plastic dimension of *Tree of Codes* does not provide a solution to the existential problems that are at the core of its narrative; instead, Jonathan Safran Foer manages to dissolve those problems by dissolving language that is the primary vehicle through which they are expressed. In this way, *Tree of Codes* overcomes the risk of turning into a presence-at-hand approach to the question of existence.

If language dematerializes and vanishes, the question arises as to what is left after language is not able to provide a solution. The dematerialization of language that takes place through the pages of *Tree of Codes* allows it to resort to silence as a possible answer for the existential concerns that shape Foer’s narrative, thereby undermining the presence-at-hand mode that sustains these issues. Wittgenstein argues that the most important things in life cannot be said, for there exists what he understands as the inexpressible. Thus, he proposes “[t]o say nothing except what can be said” (Wittgenstein 108); that is to say, not to engage in metaphysical propositions which lack an actual correspondent in the set of state of affairs that surround us, like those in which philosophy engages and the narrator’s father replicates in his discourse. One of the main ideas of *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* is that “[w]hereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent” (108). Even though *Tree of Codes* makes use of language to deal with existential matters, there is in its format, a space for silence to come through. Although Foer could have put the words together in a new page so as to avoid the blank spaces that result from the process of die-cutting and produce a visually conventional narrative, the significant gesture is precisely the fact that the blank spaces remain on the pages of the book. These spaces reflect the absence of language (the absence of the rest of the words originally written by Schulz) and give a physical and tangible dimension to silence. Furthermore, when discussing the early work of Wittgenstein, Lee Braver cites a letter the Austrian

philosopher sent to Paul Engelman in 1917 where he wrote: “[I]f only you do not try to utter what is unutterable then nothing gets lost. But the unutterable will be—unutterably—contained in what has been uttered!” (41, emphasis in original). Following this idea, it could be said that in *Tree of Codes* what is said is not as important as what has been left out, that which seems to be the unutterable and to which Jonathan Safran Foer hints at through the cuts in the pages that make manifest the existence of something that is present precisely through its absence. Besides dematerializing and playing to vanish language through its pages, the format of *Tree of Codes* also allows Foer’s work to offer a silent answer to the existential questions that haunt the characters, proving language to be insufficient for such concerns. Thus, the physicality of silence that materializes through the cut-out pages of Foer’s artifact undermines the presence-at-hand mode that permeates its narrative as well.

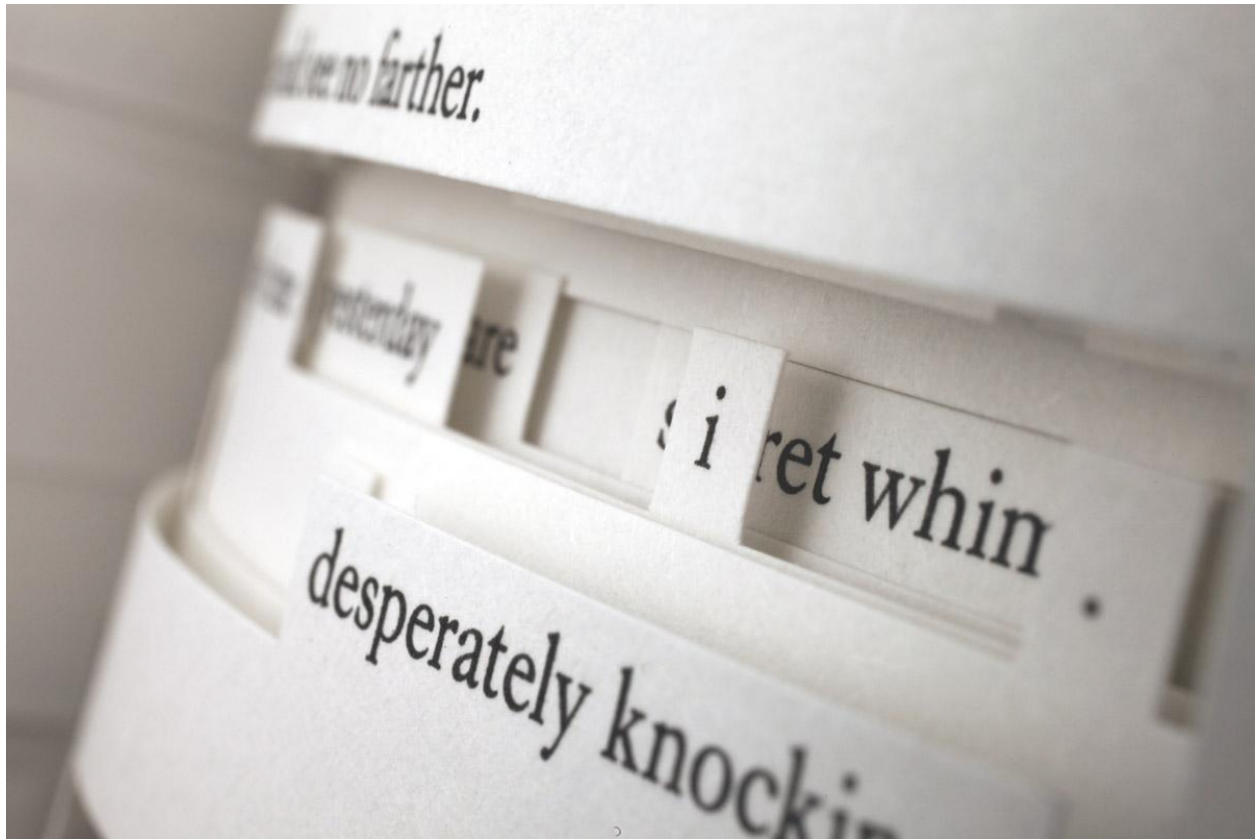


Fig. 1. Die cutting in *Tree of Codes*. Jonathan Safran Foer, *Tree of Codes* (London: Visual Editions, 2010) 68. Print.

Even though *Tree of Codes* could be said to embody many of the aspects of Wittgenstein’s early work, its complex treatment of language is also able to address many of the issues with which Wittgenstein deals in his later work. In *Philosophical Investigations*, the confusion stems not from linguistic disguise but from its complexity (Braver 36). Wittgenstein renounces to the search for the pure and honest structure of language as he discovers that “language is permeated by the furrows

and grooves of analogies, with words overlapping and tying into each other in all sort of complex and, often, purely coincidental ways” (36) that constitute what he understands as language games, in which words have meaning only within specific contexts (10). Besides being a sculptural piece, *Tree of Codes* is also a game: a language game. In its very creation, the novel reflects the complex structure of language that Wittgenstein describes since Foer’s novel or art object is inextricably connected to Bruno Schulz’s original work. The intertextuality⁴ that ties both works already suggests a playful interaction between them. Jonathan Safran Foer forces the words originally conceived by Schulz to play a different language game from the one envisioned by the Polish writer in order for them to make sense within his own narrative, resulting in adverbs sometimes performing the function of nouns, as in the case of “shadows fled sideways along the floor and up the walls – crossing the borders of almost” (Foer 24, emphasis added) and other linguistic gimmicks that sometime result in absurd, yet metaphorical sentences such as: “we passed the chemist’s large jar of pain” (Foer 10). Therefore, following Wittgenstein’s later views on language, *Tree of Codes* showcases that if there is any depth to language, this is only one which is made out of a complex network of connections and overlaps, enhancing the instability and complexity that prevents it from being a reliable source for the formulation of meaning, especially when it comes to existential matters.

Moreover, the die-cutting technique that gives shape to the book does not only vanishes language and materializes silence, but it also gives a physical dimension to the notion of language games. The blank spaces that fill (or hollow out) the pages generate a complex structure of mini windows that permit the reader to see through the pages and that give the physical body of the book a sense of tridimensional depth. Words that belong to pages become visible earlier for the reader, allowing for multiple possible readings, in each of which the words play a different language game as they are placed in different contexts. Besides reflecting the complex relationships that exist within the structures of language, the see-through effect produced by the blank spaces also portrays the purely coincidental nature of these relations described by Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations*, since, although one can read the text in various different ways, these do not always make sense according to the logical conventions of language. For example, the words “‘I was happy’, said my father” (60) are first visible on page 55, although they finally appear on full

⁴ The notion of intertextuality is inevitably tied to the notion of language games. As Julia Kristeva explains: [t]he essential point [of intertextuality] is precisely the polyvalence of the symbols, and the fact that we can add other connotations” (“Intertextuality: An Interview with Julia Kristeva”). Intertextuality rests upon the possibility of multiple connotations for the same sign according to the context.

display on page 60. Furthermore, on page 57, they may be read as it follows: “‘I was happy,’ said my father abundant yet ephemeral banging fists against had father’s face, a spiral of splendid, only to wilt and perish, deeper and deeper, at the bottom of which he stood trembling” (57-60). The same occurs with the words “abundant” and “splendid”. The first becomes visible on page 43, and the later appears first on page 50, despite the fact that both belong to page 59 (See Fig. 2). *Tree of Codes* plays with the illusion of depth, but it also exposes this as what it is: an illusion that rests upon manifold connections that make up what Wittgenstein understands as language games.

When reflecting upon the work of Heidegger and Wittgenstein in terms of existential meaning, Lee Braver sates “we have all the understanding of meaning and being that we need; we just have to recover by uncovering the reflective notions that have covered it up” (79, emphasis added). Through its format and its content, *Tree of Codes* concerns itself with uncovering those notions that act as pervading masks or screens for the understanding of existence and acknowledging their failure.

At the narrative level, *Tree of Codes* deals with these screens through the characters’ belief in transcendence and the concrete masks that result from it. They both become factors that hinder them from succeeding in their existential quests since they pervade the understanding of their own existence. This demonstrates the dangers of rendering existence as a present-at-hand object, which is what most traditional philosophy has aimed to do and what Heidegger tries to combat through his phenomenological approach, arguing that meaning does not come from thought and reflection but from an active engagement with the surroundings that compose *Dasein*’s direct environment. Jonathan Safran Foer’s narrative acknowledges this failure by showing the fragility of these masks when, upon the arrival of the catastrophe, the townspeople cannot achieve the transcendence they aimed at and their masks ultimately disintegrate.

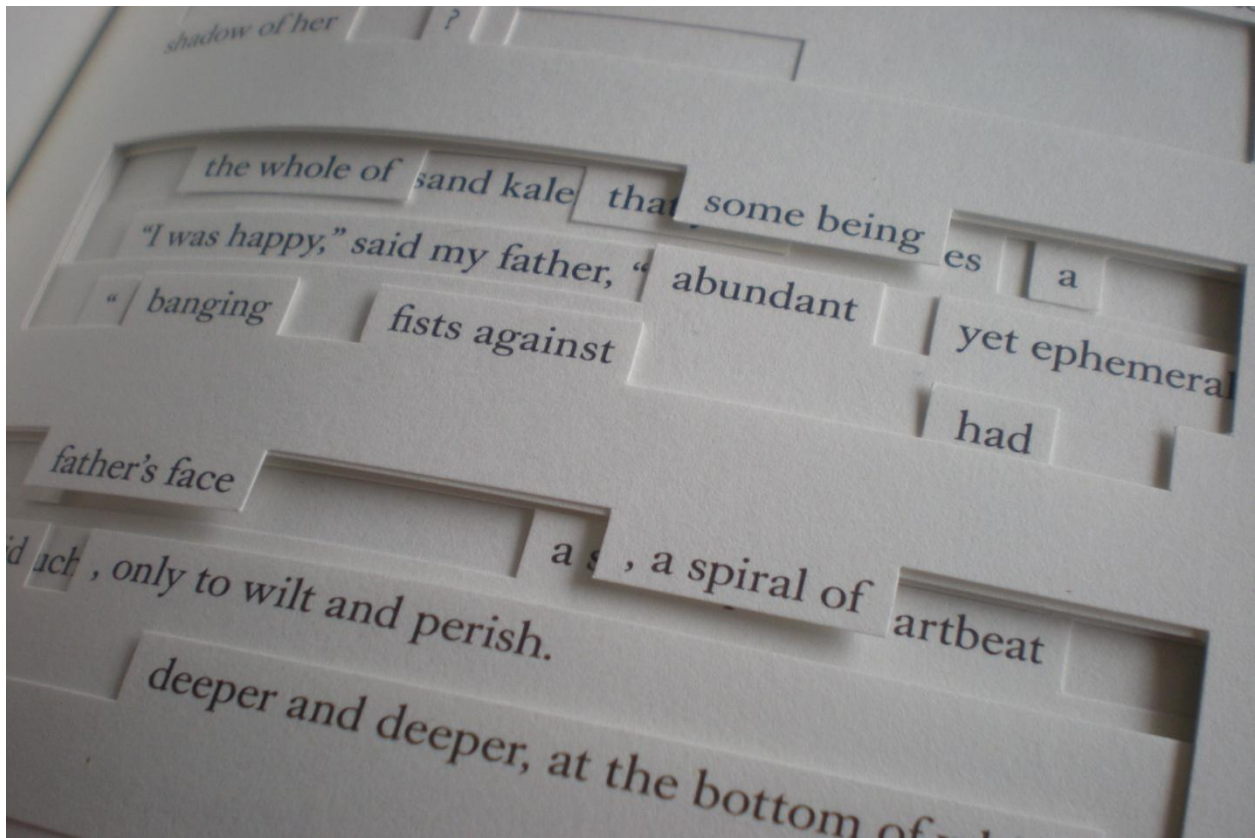


Fig. 2. Materialization of language games in *Tree of Codes*. Jonathan Safran Foer, *Tree of Codes* (London: Visual Editions, 2010) 57. Print.

The failure of the townspeople's masks is intimately connected to the failure that the plastic dimension of *Tree of Codes* acknowledges. Through the format of his work, Jonathan Safran Foer explores the plasticity of language to reveal its own fragility as a means for comprehension and conveying meaning. By exposing the coincidental and complex nature of the interactions that take place within the structures of language and by allowing the reader to actually see how words merge through the pages, *Tree of Codes* removes all the screens and masks that have permeated language and have subjected to the different obscurities that Wittgenstein tries to dismantle. The plastic dimension of Foer's work reveals language as the unstably entity that Wittgenstein considers to be and that is unsuitable to phrase and contain existential questions that fall outside of its limits.

Tree of Codes is thus concerned with destruction. The catastrophe that the inhabitants of the town await threatens to destruct their city and it does, but in doing so it also destructs all their misconceptions about existence that result from a present-at-hand approach. But language is also destructed in the material dimension of Tree of Codes, giving a concrete dimension to silence and showcasing its complexities. Jonathan Safran Foer's work ultimately concerns itself with these multiple masks (beliefs in transcendence, actual masks and language) only to unveil their own fragility and to prove how they are bound to fail in the task of understanding existence.

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