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Paradoxical Identities: An Analysis of Jonathan Safran Foer's *Here I Am*

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Abstract

This dissertation aims at illuminating Jonathan Safran Foer's latest novel, Here I Am (2016), by engaging its major themes through the concept of paradoxical identities. The first part of the work provides an analysis of the narratological framework of the novel reflecting on the author's choice of employing an authorial third-person narrator by giving an overview of the theoretical debate on the return of such a narrator in the contemporary literary landscape and exemplifying how the voice works in different passages of the novel: this formal analysis purports to justify Foer's choice in light of the purposes of the novel. After establishing how the novel functions, the dissertation shifts from a narratological to a thematic perspective, concentrating on the main character, Jacob, and unfolds his controversial figure for each thematic core, namely, American Jewishness and Family. The second chapter focuses on American Jewishness, concentrating on the relationship between Jewish identity and rituality and the opposition American Jew/Israeli Jew. The third chapter analyzes the novel in light of the subgenre of the family novel, focusing on the dissolution of the marriage between Jacob and Julia by analyzing their negotiation with their identities as parents, spouses and individuals. The last part of the chapter focuses on Julia and Jacob's eldest son, Sam, and his living a sort of double life, real and digital.

Contents

Introduction

> God's test of Abraham is written like this: "Sometime later, God tested Abraham. He said to him, 'Abraham!' 'Here I Am,' Abraham replied." Most people assume that the test is what follows: God asking Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac. But I think it could also be read that the test was when He called to him. Abraham didn't say, "What do you want?" He didn't say, "Yes?" he answered with a statement: "Here I Am." Whatever God needs or wants, Abraham is wholly present for Him, without conditions or reservations or need for explanation […] When Abraham is taking Isaac up Mount Moriah, Isaac becomes aware of what they are doing, and how fucked up it is. He knows that he is about to be the sacrifice, in the way that all kids always do when it's about to happen. It says: "And Isaac said to Abraham, his father, 'My father!" and he said, 'Here I Am, my son.' And Isaac said, 'Here is the fire and the wood but where is the sheep for the offering?' And Abraham said, 'Good will see to the sheep for the offering, my son.'" […] And Abraham doesn't ask, "What do you want?" He says, "Here I Am." When God asks for Abraham, Abraham is wholly present for God. When Isaac asks for Abraham, Abraham is wholly present for his son. But how can that be possible? God is asking Abraham to kill Isaac, and Isaac is asking his father to protect him. How can be Abraham be two directly opposing things at once? (Foer, 126)

When, at the book presentation made at the Theaterzaal Vooruit of Ghent in October 2016, Jonathan Safran Foer was asked why he decided to entitle his latest novel *Here I Am*, the words used by the author to explain his choice were almost identical to those we can find in the novel coming from Sam on the occasion of his avatar Samanta's bat mitzvah speech. The reference is, obviously, the iconic

passage from chapter 22 of *Genesis* in which God asks Abraham to take his beloved son, Isaac, to Mount Moriah and to sacrifice him as proof of his love and devotion for him. Foer's interpretation of the passage focuses on Abraham's being "unconditionally present without reservations" for both God and his son. In Foer's perspective (and in Sam's perspective in the speech) this moment is paradoxical because "you can't be unconditionally present for a God who wants you to kill your son while being unconditionally present for your son." This is the foundational observation on which Foer develops his novel by bringing this theme from the origin of Judaism "into this contemporary setting in Washington DC", in a six-week journey with the Blochs.

Foer's reflection on *Here I Am* is, indeed, the starting point for the analysis I offer in my dissertation; the novel opens to different threads related to the contemporary identity of a Jewish American family and the negotiations intrinsic to such identity. As he admitted, Foer's aim for his third novel was to represent those "identity paradoxes" (or, as I rephrased, paradoxical identities) that are "something everybody has his version of" and emphasize their paradoxicality through situations that "force choices", choices that, apparently, do not allow the coexistence of paradoxical identities and ask for taking a stance, for a univocal "Here I Am."

The overall aim of this dissertation will be to try to illuminate the novel, both from a formal and a thematical standpoint, through the lens this concept provides, in the simultaneous attempt to position the novel in the contemporary landscape of the American novel.

The tenets of my analysis will be what I deem the three thematic cores of the novel: American Jewishness, Family, and the blurring of digitality and reality. I

develop each of these themes by focusing on how paradoxicality plays a fundamental role in the unfolding of the trajectories of the main characters of the novel, namely Julia, Sam, and most of all, Jacob.

Before concentrating on the thematic features of the novel, the very first chapter of my dissertation will provide a formal, narratological analysis. This chapter will function as a passkey for the rest of the chapters. I will, indeed, focus on the narratorial voice employed, starting by contextualizing the work in the framework of the return of the third-person authorial narrator in present-tense literature, then by entering specifically the text by analyzing some of its passages to highlight the different characteristics of this voice in the novel, to eventually trying to justify Foer's choice in light of what I deem the purposes of the novel to be. This part of the dissertation will aim at presenting the tools necessary to approach the thematic issues at the center of the following chapters. I will focus primarily on the access the narrator has to the characters' interiorities, arguing, however, that Foer decided to have Jacob as the main focalizer in the novel. This will be relevant to our thematic analysis because it will justify why most of the themes developed in the novel are associated with Jacob.

In the second chapter, I will begin my thematic analysis by focusing on the theme of American Jewishness. The main character, Jacob, finds himself both inside and outside Jewishness, so much so that he struggles to define himself as religious while he is attached to the notion of Jewishness for its cultural meaning. The contraposition between the American secularization both he and Julia (and his father before him) promote in their family, and the Jewish identity they can only keep by maintaining Jewish rituality in their lives and that of their children coalesce in this Jewish American identity that leaves more questions than the

answers it gives. In the first part of the chapter, I will focus on the relationship the Blochs have with rituality, both inside and outside Jewishness, and how it often results in hypocritical, self-serving reasoning coming out of this fragmented Jewish American identity made up of inconsistent, paradoxical identities. The second part of the chapter will instead look at the theme of paradoxical identities concerning Jewishness from another point of view, that of the opposition between American Jews and Israeli Jews that coincide in the novel with the confrontation between Jacob and his cousin Tamir. With Tamir's arrival in the United States, Jacob starts confronting the notion of the Jewish homeland, and the relationship between American Jews and Israel in his definition of Jewish identity.

The third chapter will focus on an analysis of *Here I Am* as a family novel; after establishing how the novel can enter this sub-genre, I will approach the theme of the family by analyzing the relationship between Julia and Jacob and the dissolution of their marriage; by doing so I will focus on the identities that overlap in the development of their relationship, arguing that the role of parents, that of husband and wife, and the need both feel of expressing their true selves, works paradoxically and eventually bring the two apart. In the second part of the chapter, I will zoom in on Julia and Jacob's interiorities to unfold how the need for truthful self-expression the two are unable to release inside their relationship is instead developed, privately but not necessarily differently, by both of them.

With a similar approach to that used for Julia and Jacob, the last part of the chapter will be centered on the character of Sam, Julia and Jacob's eldest son, and the negotiation of his identity between reality and digitality. Sam, a few weeks away from his bar mitzvah, lives an adolescent crisis caught between a sense of

repulsion toward his body and the feeling of being misunderstood and unappreciated by those who surround him. The digital world of Other Life is the shelter he resorts to, an alternative reality in which he feels to be able to express himself truthfully. In this last part of my dissertation, I will focus on how these two alternative worlds, that of reality and digitality, work in Sam's life, in a paradoxical blurring between what is real and what is fake, in the context of a Jewish coming-of-age.

1. The Narrator In *Here I Am*

The novel *Here I Am*, as we have already explained, has a biblical symbolism that is central to the understanding of the novel. Another perspective, however, can be taken into consideration while thinking about this choice; this title contains and puts upfront a strong subjectivity, a subjectivity that the reader assumes will be unfolded in the novel. If we think about subjectivity in narrative theory, we cannot but expect the narrative situation that, more than any other, represents subjectivity, namely a first-person narrative. We expect the "I" present in the title to be developed in the novel. Yet, as soon as we cross the threshold of the novel and begin reading, we notice that the narrative situation is very different from what we expected: the narrative voice employed is a third-person narrator that will turn out to have traits that "make him/her an authority commanding practically godlike abilities such as omniscience and omnipresence" (Jahn 53).

Let us then try and illuminate the author's narrating instance for *Here I Am.*

After establishing the narrative voice in charge, I will analyze the use of focalization in the novel and comment on some passages that exemplify the narratological structure of the novel. Finally, in the last part of the chapter, I will reflect on the choice *not* to employ a first-person narrator as the voice in charge of telling the story. Here, after clarifying why Jacob would have been the most immediate choice for being the narrator, I address the author's choice and present what I deem were Foer's purposes for the novel.

1.1 A Brief Look at Theory

Before entering the analysis of the narrative situation in Foer's novel, it is worth looking at the theoretical debate concerning narrative voices in 21st-century fiction to have a sharper idea of where to position the novel in relation to the contemporary literary environment. To do so we will look especially at Paul Dawson's work and his mapping of the contemporary novel from a narratological perspective.

As remarked by Dawson, Gerhard Hoffmann identified the period so-called "post-postmodern", starting from the last decade of the 20th century, as the period characterized by "the return to traditional forms of narrative and storytelling", but recognizing in this return a new awareness as a consequence of the impact of postmodernism that prevented "a return to the belief system of traditional realism"(*The Return of the Omniscient Narrator* 4).

Even if many scholars recognized this return to traditional form but rejected the idea of a comeback of omniscience (Aubry, for instance, argued that "the omniscient narrator has mostly retired from the scene of contemporary U.S. fiction. In the place of this appealingly wise but problematic figure emerges an array of speakers no less ignorant, prejudiced, and confused than the reader" 151), other scholars, Dawson above all, interpreted Hoffmann's argument in light of a reconfiguration of omniscience in contemporary fiction.

From this starting point, Dawson went on elaborating a theory around what he defined as "the return of the omniscient narrator", a narratorial voice characterized by "overt displays of zero focalization […] and extranarrative statements which establish [its] intrusive presence" (63). He also specified the difference between what he called the "contemporary omniscient narrator" and

the "classical omniscient narrator", underlining how the difference is not merely chronological but stands in "an awareness of the influence of postmodernism on the figure of authorship which their narrative voices project" (63-64).

Given these premises, Dawson developed "four permeable and overlapping modes of narrative authority which contemporary omniscience relies upon" (69): The Ironic Moralist, The Literary Historian, the Pyrotechnic Storyteller, and the Immersion Journalist and Social Commentator. According to him, the emergence, or we might argue the re-emergence, of this kind of voice in the post-postmodernist era, comes "from an attempt to engage with the insights of postmodernism while reconfiguring the authority of the novelist in the public sphere" (69) in response to "a perceived decline in cultural authority of the novel over the last two decades" (5). This trajectory for Dawson went toward an "aesthetic of maximalism in which the narrator's voice is always present" (5).

Considering this theoretical framework, one might wonder whether *Here I Am* may be said to belong to one of the four "modes" Dawson lists, considering the novel's main features. In reality, I would argue that the novel does not really fit in any of Dawson's categories: Foer's novel confirms Dawson's (and Hoffman's) theory that contemporary literature manifests a return to a third-person authorial narration, but presents another kind of authoriality, so to speak, different from those developed by Dawson. We might think that this would be one of those "works written today which employ omniscient narration but are not

contemporary in their use of the form"[1] (64) or that, even more radically, it does not really fit Dawson's general definition of omniscient narration as "an authorial narrator's rhetorical performance of narrative authority manifested most overtly in self-reflexive, intrusive commentary" (66) (in this sense I have already clarified how the narrator shows traits of omniscience which does not automatically imply an overt manifestation of omniscience throughout the novel) but, it is also true that the novel, even if in not all the aspects, goes in the direction of maximalism the "modes of narrative authority" (69) theorized by Dawson are an indication of.

It is evident that Foer's novel cannot be defined as a quintessential maximalist novel, if we look at Ercolino's "ten elements that define and structure it as a genre of the contemporary novel" (242); we can easily see how only some of them can be recognized in *Here I Am* while other are very distant from Foer's novel (especially, as I will argue later, what Ercolino defines as "Dissonant Chorality"), but we will see in the last part of this chapter how it can be associated with Dawson's definition of maximalist fiction in its purpose of proposing an "expansive exploration of social relations"("The Return of Omniscience in Contemporary Fiction" 156), beyond subjectivity, beyond self-reflexive singularity.

[1] In giving this definition Dawson counterposes David Foster Wallace's "Octet", which he takes as an example of what he defines as contemporary omniscience, with Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* which, on the other hand, despite its being contemporary from a temporal perspective, he defines as an "example of classic omniscience, modeling its form on the Victorian novel". In defining the characteristics of what he labels as contemporary omniscience he conceptualizes an "exemplary voice" based on two aspects: the self-reflexivity formerly introduced by postmodernists in "foregrounding the presence of an author-narrator", and the "post-postmodern novelistic anxiety over the cultural relevance of fiction produced by institutional conditions of literary culture."

1.2 How Narration And Focalization Work In *Here I Am*

As we said, Foer chose a third-person narrator to be in charge of the telling of the story. Even if the voice shows traits of authorial narration, the third-person narrator is very different from the "return of the omniscient narrator" Dawson theorized and we have just talked about.

In this part of the thesis, I will look at some passages that will provide evidence of how this voice works, arguing that we are dealing mainly with an authorial narrator that presents that usual access to many characters, but privileges one focalizers on the others: Jacob. This said, Foer's choice of not excluding completely the perspectives of other characters is essential, as I will argue in the last part of this chapter, in light of the all-comprehensive aim of the novel.

In analyzing this voice, I will then highlight how the focalization is rendered as apparently multi-voiced, multi-perspectival, concentrating in particular on those cases in which we can witness what Dorrit Cohn defined as *stylistic contagion*, "places where psychonarration verges on the narrated monologue, marking a kind of mid-point between the two techniques where a reported syntax is maintained, but where the idiom is strongly affected (or infected) with the mental idiom of the mind it renders"(33).

If the premise I made suggests some sort of polyphony in the novel handled and organized by an authorial narrator (exactly what I mentioned before as one of the pillars Ercolino identified in the definition of the maximalist novel), I want immediately to clarify that this is not the case at all; the novel's focalization on Jacob is so preponderant and all-embracing that the only formal trait that warrants that we are not dealing with a figural narrative is that there are chapters

in which Jacob cannot be the focalizer because he is not physically there and so cannot be focalizing the events and situations presented. If that was not the case, it would have been very difficult to argue that we were dealing with an authorial narrator rather than with a figural narrative. Alternatively, one might even argue that the narrative is indeed figural and the parts that do not involve are still Jacob's projections of other characters' thoughts and feelings, but this is not what I will try to do in this thesis.

After this clarification we can concentrate on those passages that provide evidence that we are dealing with an authorial narrator and that will show how the intrusions of this voice are used differently throughout the novel.

If from the incipit of the novel we might question whose focalization we are following (Isaac's? Jacob's? Zero focalization?), we can immediately recognize the presence of an authorial narrator when the first instability of the novel is presented. To present the situation at the Hebrew school and before focusing on what is happening inside rabbi Singer's office, the narrator guides us through the hallways of Adas Israel where a group of boys are walking around speaking; the scene depicts a conversation that has everything to do with puberty and the discovery of sexuality. The situation presents these boys engaged in an effort to show off their knowledge of sexuality from a perspective none of the main focalizers of the novel can have. The conversation is reported while Sam is outside the rabbi's office and Julia and Jacob are "on the other side of the rabbi's door" (6). We are guided by the narrator from the halls to the rabbi's office as if we were entering the school with the boys, but the narrator is not only a passive voice that sees and listens to what they are talking about. This voice also accesses to their interiorities so much so that he tells us that "a redhead boy" who is

participating in a very explicit and vulgar conversation, "still got chills from so much as thinking about the epilogue of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*" (5).

The narrator's intrusion can also be seen in the comment on the controversial conversation the boys are having:

> If God existed and judged, He would have forgiven these boys everything, knowing they were compelled by forces outside of themselves inside of themselves, and that they, too, were made in His image. (5)

The narrator in this case somehow justifies the inappropriate conversations the boys are having but he does so in what may be considered a blasphemous way, by recalling *Genesis* in a situation in which the resemblance between God and men may be sexually connoted. Moreover, the existence of God is immediately questioned by the narrator, it is not something that is taken for granted, instead, it seems as if this voice starts from the belief in the inexistence of God rather than its existence. Even if implicitly, we witness in this passage a feature of this voice that is not entirely neutral, it is not the mere report of what is happening outside and inside the consciousness of the characters but that somehow judges them through a given set of values, coloring the telling.

Another part of the novel in which the authorial voice intrudes to fill the informational gap for the reader to have a broader knowledge of the situation and to access information the characters do not have access to is part IV, "Fifteen Days of Five thousand years". The earthquake in Israel is sliding toward a war and the narrator decides to give us information about how the situation is evolving in the course of fifteen days; part IV definitely disrupts the rest of the novel narratively speaking. For each of the fifteen days, bits and pieces of

information concerning the political situation around what is happening in Israel and random news about the impact the war is having on people (the story of three-year-old Palestinian girl Adia for example) are reported. It is as if we readers are offered the words that come from newspapers, social media and television, with no filters whatsoever, with the language of these channels (as if the reader was there listening to the television or reading the newspaper). From this standpoint, nothing that we have access to cannot be accessed by the characters until, we are also told some details that are, instead, inaccessible.

The first example is the reporting of a communication between the king of Jordan and the prime minister of Israel, then we are informed about a phone call between the American president and the Israeli prime minister, and again about the request for military aid from the US to Israel and eventually we are informed about the three strategies the ministry of defense proposes to the prime minister of Israel to win the war. These are all details that are relevant to understand the relationship between the US and Israel, or understanding the strategy behind the operation *Reverse Diaspora* in all its ruthlessness, and are all information none of the characters can access, they are told to us through authorial intrusions to give a clearer idea of the situation, to anticipate what will happen in the story by giving a comprehensive perspective. Differently from the previous example, in this case the authorial voice is not audible, but can be seen through the free access of any information, to what is usually labeled as "omnipresence"; as the narrator can access the house of the Blochs, the interiority of all the characters, in this case he enters the office of the prime minister and reads the letters, listens to his calls and recounts to the reader all the relevant information.

Above all the other powers this narrator has, the main characteristic (and surely the most significant) is that of having access to the characters' interiorities.

Before analyzing Jacob's focalization, which is of paramount importance for understating how the narrative voice works, we will look at how the narrative voice works with the other focalizers, namely Julia and Sam. These characters are the only two characters who have entire chapters or parts of chapters in which they are the focalizers. Even if other details show the ability to enter also other characters' perspectives (in the chapter "Here I Amn't" for example, while Sam and Max are talking we are told about what Max has in his pocket, "a Jolly Rancher wrapper, a stubby pencil from a minigolf outing, a receipt whose type had vanished" (86), entering Max and his sensorial response to putting his hand in his pocket), Foer decides to concentrate on these three characters, who, as a result, become to be the most developed throughout the novel.

As I have anticipated, a feature we can find in many passages characterizing the rendering of consciousness in the third-person context of *Here I Am* is that of stylistic contagion. The following passage is one example of how psycho-narration verges into narrated monologue, through the usage of words that belong to an idiosyncratic subjective way of articulating the world that can be attributed to the focalizer's consciousness (in this case Sam's). The evidence of focalization in these kinds of passages does not only come from the narrator entering into the characters' interiorities but is also manifested by the characters' lexicon, as their idioms become explicit:

> Sam thought about texting seeing through these Billie, seeing if she might want to join him at a modern dance performance (or show, or whatever they're called) on Saturday. It sounded cool, as she'd written about it in her

> diary, which he'd removed from her unattended backpack while she was in the gym, concealed behind his far larger, far less interesting chemistry textbook, and perused – a word that means the exact opposite of what most people think it means. (82)

In this passage, not only are we told what Sam is thinking but the coloring of the lexicon is Sam's, his incompetence in naming a dance show, his defining his chemistry textbook as "far less interesting" than Billie's diary, his use of obsolete words (a similar example of this use can be found a couple of pages earlier when we are told about his use of the word "perambulation" 80). These are not words that come from the lexicon of the authorial narrator (who has, as we will see, much more consonance with Jacob's lexicon) but they are "borrowed" from the focalizer.

More generally, throughout the novel, we can see how Sam's lexicon affects the text when he is the focalizer when, for instance, talking about Julia and Jacob, they are not referred to by their names, but they are called "mum" and "dad."

However, the rendering of the focalizers' interiorities is not limited to using their linguistic landmarks. In this passage the narrator enters the interiority of Julia who, after having been told by Mark about his divorce, reflects on her condition and negotiates between her sense of identity and the concept of happiness:

> Of course it wasn't the first time she'd confronted the question, but it was the first time that it had been posed by someone else. It was the first time he didn't have the ability to evade it. Would she be happier alone? *I am a mother*, she thought - not an answer to the question being asked, and no more her ultimate ambition than happiness, but her ultimate identity. She had no lives

> to compare with her life, no parallel aloneness to measure against her aloneness. She was simply doing what she thought was the right thing to do. Living what she thought was the right life. (59-60)

In this passage we are told about what is perhaps Julia's most intimate inner conflict, the confrontation between what it means for her to be happy and what she deems as her "ultimate identity", that of mother, and we are told so by entering her mind, exploring through her thoughts and her trying to convince herself to be making the right choices (the word "thought" is pervasively repeated in the passage).

Furthermore, this case of stylistic contagion goes beyond the narrated monologue; we have further access, downplaying the narrator's presence, to her interior monologue, stressed in italics. The presence of the narrator we witness in the following "she thought" is submerged by the dominance of Julia's focalization in the passage, so much so that it results unnecessary. This is not an isolated case, it is a feature frequently used in rendering the characters' consciousnesses, which thus take center stage.

This access to the characters' interiorities is displayed very often in situations in which characters interact, situations in which the distance between what characters say and what they are thinking to say, or would rather say but cannot, becomes prominent; as we will see, one of the main themes of the novel is incommunicability and to emphasize this thematic choice Foer decides to employ this third-person narrator who in such situations stresses what characters "would have said" or "almost said" or how they interpreted the same situation in different ways. This choice is applied mainly in representing the relationship between Jacob and Julia. Here is one among many such examples, from the very

beginning of the chapter "What Do the Children Know?" in part V, "Not to Have a Choice is also a Choice":

> Julia wanted to rehearse the conversation with the kids. Jacob could have argued that it was unnecessary right then, as they weren't going to have the actual conversation until after the bar mitzvah and burial dust had cleared. But he agreed, hoping that Julia's ears would hear what her mouth said. And more, he interpreted her desire to rehearse as a desire to roleplay – an acknowledgment that she wasn't sure. Just as she interpreted the willingness to rehearse as a sign that he was, in fact, ready to move forward with the end. (371)

The different perspectives on what this conversation with the kids means lead Jacob and Julia in two opposite directions, the reading of each of the character's interpretation of the other manifests not only diversity in their positions but also their inability to understand the other, or, rather an unwillingness to understand the other's standpoint beyond one own's perspective. Jacob is hopeful and does not want to let the marriage go and interprets Julia's response as reflecting this hope; Julia is ready to let go and interprets Jacob's willingness to have the conversation as his being ready to move forward. The contrast between these two perspectives is emphasized by this back and forth from one interiority to the other.

Lastly, another very important feature of this narratorial voice is its analectic and proleptic privileges; prolepsis and analepsis are inserted profusely throughout the novel. We are told, for instance, about the disaster that will happen in Israel, which will be presented only late in the novel, in the very first sentence of the novel. Memories that are useful to understand current situations

or future events that reveal the unfolding of other ones functional to the story's trajectory are employed freely by the narrator. If the story starts, develops and finishes in a temporal space of forty days, we cannot deny that the narrator's access to events that go beyond this temporal limit is unlimited. Allegorical events that help us understand the nature of characters, brief mentions of events we readers have not witnessed yet, and many other examples of disruption of the linear timeline of the story are evident traits of this authorial voice.

One example of the use of analepsis is when the narrator tells us about Jacob and Julia's dates in an Inn in Pennsylvania; we are told about the couple's first date fifteen years before the storyline begins and then about the recreation of such date ten years after (five years before the storyline). Both these events occurred in a moment that precedes the time of the story and the confrontation between the two dates ten years apart is used by the narrator to clarify for the reader how the relationship between Jacob and Julia has changed.

As anticipated, however, this authorial voice is much more related to Jacob's focalization than any other novel character.

To understand how Foer allows Jacob's focalization to take center stage, it is worth looking at the concepts of consonance and dissonance in contexts of third-person narratives introduced by Dorrit Cohn. She theorized how:

> In psychological novels, where a fictional consciousness holds center stage, there is a considerable variation in the manner of narrating this consciousness. These variations range between two principal types: one is dominated by a prominent narrator who, even as he focuses intently on an individual psyche, remains emphatically distanced from the consciousness

> he narrates; the other is mediated by a narrator who remains effaced and who readily fuses with the consciousness he narrates. (26)

In defining these two extremities within the continuum of narrations of consciousnesses, Cohn focuses on the concept of distance between the third-person narrator and the character whose consciousness is depicted, conceptualizing the notion of consonance as that particular case in which this distance is almost invisible.

In trying to demonstrate how this is the case in *Here I Am* as far as Jacob's consciousness is concerned, it is not difficult, as I have already done, to demonstrate the moments in which the narratorial intervention distances from Jacob's consciousness but, on the other hand, it is trickier to show how, in the rest of the cases, we are dealing with a voice that is very close to Jacob's consciousness. If the same approach applied to Sam and Julia might be a viable way to demonstrate the prevalence of Jacob's focalization, to have a more all-comprehensive perspective and to stress the consonance between narrator and character's consciousness I will use another approach.

Whereas most of the novel employs a third-person narrator, there is one part, part VII entitled "The Bible", in which we are presented with another voice, Jacob's, narrating in first-person. In this part, we are presented Jacob's work, "the bible of the *Ever-Dying People*", the stage instructions for the mise-en-scene of a TV show he is secretly working on, and that, however, he cannot share with anyone and keeps in a drawer.[2] Jacob himself, late in the novel, defines the bible

[2] Small bits of "the bible of the *Ever-Dying People*" are also present previously, in particular in the first chapter of part III, "Holding a pen, punching, self-love", in chapters 6 and 7 of part V, "The names were magnificent" and "Reincarnation".

as "a kind of guide to how to read [the script]. For future actors, a future director." (562) and the TV series as "a redemption of his family's destruction" (649). The actual script of the show is missing in the novel, and it seems as if the writing of this bible is more important than the writing of the script itself (the first time this show is mentioned, we are told that "Jacob would have preferred to be working on the bible of *Ever-Dying People.*" 6).

The structure of this part of the novel is one of a kind in comparison to the rest of the text; it is not divided into chapters like the other parts, but in small bits that are instructions for the staging of Jacob's TV show, each of which begins with "How to play […]". The instructions, however, are related to Jacob's life and are told in Jacob's own voice.

What is most important about this part, however, is not how different it is from the others, but how comes the differences do not disrupt the overall vocal texture of the novel. Obviously, the structure is more fragmented and the back and forth in temporality disrupts the linearity of the rest of the novel (which, in any case, with the presence of prolepsis and analepsis, is not thoroughly linear) but the voice, which should create an even greater disruption is very close, lexically speaking, to that of the third-person narrator in charge of telling the story for the rest of the novel. We do not perceive a break between these two voices and this demonstrates Jacob's prevalence throughout the novel; if, as we have analyzed in this part of the chapter, Foer's choice was to make the focalizers' lexicons influence the narration, it is obvious that encountering the main focalizer of the novel as a first-person narrator would not bewilder the reader. Deciding to give voice to Jacob and being this voice not much distant from the one of the third-person narrator that is leading us throughout the story is the litmus paper of how

Jacob's focalization prevails and his vocabulary influences the novel as a whole, putting the narrator in the position of, using Cohn's words, "[fusing] with the consciousness he narrates" (26).

1.3 The Choice of a Third-Person Narrator: Why Having Jacob Narrating in the First-Person Would not Have Been the Right Choice

In the introduction of *Experiencing Fiction: Judgments, Progressions and the Rhetorical Theory of Narrative*, James Phelan presents three theses that he will sustain in the book within what he calls "a broader rhetorical approach to narrative" (3) based on five principles. The first principle Phelan explains concerns the idea of understanding narrative as a rhetorical act, "somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened" (3). As far as fictional narrative is concerned, Phelan continues, "the rhetorical situation is doubled" (3), because it works on two levels, the level of the narrator as the teller and the one of the author as the communicator. Phelan concludes by saying that "recognizing the consequences of this double communicative situation […] is fundamental to a rhetorical understanding of character narration" (4).

For the analysis of Jonathan Safran Foer's narrator, and especially to justify the choice of having a third-person authorial narrator in charge of telling the story of the Blochs, I will start exactly from this principle to analyze what would have meant for Foer to choose a first-person narrator (I will argue that this voice would have been Jacob's) and why this would have been incompatible with Foer's purposes for this novel.

However, before entering Phelan's approach, I think it is important to add some information about why Jacob would have been the most logical choice (but

not entirely functional) to represent the "I" the reader approaches in the title and expects to be reflected in the novel as well.

We have already analyzed how the novel works and how the main focalizer is Jacob, how the story is depending on him, how he is the only one about whom we are told in future tense, and how he is the only one who appears as a first-person narrator; there are, however, also more details that can lead us to think that it would have been the most logical decision in case Foer decided to have a first-person in charge of the narration.

A biographical parallel between Jacob and Jonathan Safran Foer himself is another element that would have suggested this choice. Throughout the novel, many are the details that lead us to associate the life of the author with Jacob and think of him as Foer's alter ego: two years before the publication of *Here I Am*, Foer divorced his former wife, and the divorce between Jacob and Julia is a central theme in the novel; Jacob is a writer who "won the National Jewish Book Award at the age of twenty-four" (198) as Foer did in 2001 with *Everything Is Illuminated* precisely at the same age; Jacob is a writer that decided to try to write TV shows and that works with HBO exactly as Foer did, also for HBO, with the comedy *All Talk* in 2012.

We might think of Jacob as Foer's alter ego like how Nathan Zuckerman was Philip Roth's alter ego: the mobilization of many autobiographical correspondences alongside the decision to distance themselves from their respective characters starting from naming.

If we go back to Foer's first novel, *Everything Is Illuminated*, we might argue that the idea of introducing a character that can be seen as the author's alter-ego is not a one-time choice made by Foer; in the novel that put him on the map of

American literature, indeed, we have Jonathan Safran Foer as one of the characters, a character that once again resembles the author himself very much and that once again is not in charge of telling us the story (the narration, in that case, was entrusted to the "stilted, very jarring English" of the young Ukrainian Alex Perchov ("Talks at Google")).

In the case of *Here I Am*, however, Foer allegedly prefers to distance himself and the character starting from naming (if the character had been named Jonathan Safran Foer, we would have struggled to go beyond the idea of the novel as mainly autobiographical).

After these premises, we might ask ourselves why, eventually, Foer decided not to have Jacob in charge of the narration. To answer this question we have to look at what this would have meant for the story as a whole and what flaws this voice would have had in representing the story in *Here I Am*.

We should start with one question, *What is implied in a first-person narrative?*

First of all, relying on a character for the telling of a story means having a single perspective throughout the tale. It implies that the limited knowledge of this voice will limit the reader's own knowledge in the unfolding of the story (we know only what the character tells us which is limited to what he/she knows).

At the same time, a consequence of our being limited to what this (hypothetical) first-person narrator tells us is that the reader is at the mercy of this voice, which means that the question of reliability is always at stake while advancing in the story and one of the six types of unreliability identified by Phelan ("misinterpreting and underinterpreting; misevaluating and underevaluating; and misreporting and underreporting"("Reliable, Unreliable and Deficient Narrator" 98)) have to be always considered by the reader in his

evaluation of the narrator. Jacob is the perfect fit for an unreliable narrator if we take Rimmon-Kenan's definition of the main sources of unreliability, namely "the narrator's limited knowledge, his personal involvement and his problematic value-scheme" (100).

The fact that Jacob is a writer would problematize his position as a narrator even more; as readers, we will be questioning how much of what he tells us will be authentic and how much will be filtered by his own idea of telling us a story. When we read *The Human Stain* or *American Pastoral* we can never forget that Zuckerman is in charge, and this is of paramount importance for the meaning of the novels themselves.

The choice of a first-person narrator plays a role also on the empathic relationship that readers create with characters; talking about the importance of narrative situations in the arousal of empathic responses from readers, Suzanne Keen includes "first-person self-narration, figural narration […] or authorial narration that moves omnisciently inside many characters' minds" (96) as the narrative situations that are more likely to promote character identification on readers. However, she also clarifies how "first-person fiction, in which the narrator self-narrates his or her own experiences and perceptions, is thought to invite an especially close relationship between reader and narrative voice"(97), implying how the empathic response of readers would exclusively concern the character in charge of narrating and will almost completely exclude other characters. As for knowledge, even the empathic arousal would be limited by the choice of having Jacob as the narrator.

Choosing Jacob as a narrator would have weakened the focalization of other characters, and would have reduced their perspectives into a theorized and

fictitious rendering from Jacob's point of view. Choosing a first-person narrative would have meant deciding to tell Jacob's story from Jacob's point of view rendering so the whole novel all about Jacob's subjectivity while Foer's aim was very far from the mere representation of a subject.

The choice of having a third-person narrator works in the opposite direction instead; with this choice Foer wanted to authenticate the voice and reinforce Jacob's focalization with details he has no access to and focalizations that cannot be his. This gives the tale a broader horizon that is functional to depict the meaningfulness that the novel aims to represent. Not having Sam's focalization would have limited our comprehension of his trajectory, not having Julia's focalization would have meant limiting the perspective of the divorce to Jacob's perception, excluding the authorial intrusions would have erased the component of the untold in the novel which is central in the representation of the relationships between the characters. The novel is about big themes and aims to universalize them, to speak about what it means to be a Jew in America, to be inside a marriage that is falling apart when children are involved. This is where the hypothetical first-person narrative would fail if we look at it through the lens of Phelan's principle of a fictional narrative as a double rhetorical act; even if it might have worked on one level, it would have failed in the purposes of the author communicating to the reader, in conveying the novel's intentional system.

Foer's choice of having Jacob as the main focalizer is, in any case, a recognition of the proximity between the author and this character, so much so that, using Jacob's words, "Should he one day share it and be asked how autobiographical it was, he would say, 'It's not my life, but it's me.'" (244). But issues such as

American Jewishness or the dissolution of a family are not only Foer's and this is what the novel aims to depict.

2. Jacob and the Question of Being an American Jew

> I think that being Jewish for a lot of contemporary Jews is to wrestle with what it means to be a continuation of a history and a tradition, and a set of codes of being, whether you interpret them as laws or as literature, or something in between, as I might. Being a perpetuation of that tradition does feel important to me, but that doesn't mean adhering to anything, what it actually means is engaging with it over time, so the fact of it being an open question over the course of a lifetime doesn't suggest you haven't found a comfortable identity, it could be that the identity is questioning over time which to me seems very rich, an open question is richer than a question you have the answer for. ("Jonathan Safran Foer: Here I Am ")[3]

American Jewishness is certainly a central theme in *Here I Am* and is one of the main ways in which we can analyze the character of Jacob in relation to the theme of paradoxical identities. The search for a definition of what it means to be a Jew in present-tense America, of what characterizes a distinctive Jewish Identity in the United States, and consequently the reflection on the actual existence of such a thing as Jewish American literature in the contemporary literary environment have been some of the issues contemporary scholars have tried to tackle. As remarked by Aaron Tillman in the introduction of *Magical American Jew: The Enigma of Difference in Contemporary Jewish American Short Fiction and Film*, in *The Holocaust in America* (2000) Peter Novick exemplifies such difficulties in finding a univocal definition of what it means to be an American Jew:

[3] Interview released at the International Authors' Stage in the Black Diamond of Copenhagen

> These days American Jews can't define their Jewishness on the basis of distinctively Jewish religious beliefs, since most don't have much in the way of distinctively Jewish religious beliefs. They can't define it by distinctively Jewish cultural traits, since most don't have any of these either. American Jews are sometimes said to be united by their Zionism, but if so, it is of a thin and abstract variety: most have never visited Israel; most contribute little to, and know even less about, that country. (Novick qtd. in Tillman 1)

In the last chapter of the 2003 *Cambridge Companion To Jewish American Literature*, Tresa Grauer tried to outline how the notion of Jewish American literature has developed in the contemporary period, starting from debunking Howe's idea of a "disintegration" of such concept that he related to the distinctiveness of the voices related to "the immigrant Jewish milieu" (qtd. in Grauer 269), lost in the now fully-assimilated Jewish experience. To Grauer "definitions of Jewish American literature are clearly inextricably entwined with the terms by which we understand Jewish American identity" ("Identity Matters: Contemporary Jewish American Writing" 270) and as the understanding of such identity changes and takes different forms, so does also its literary counterpart. Contemporary texts showcased the centrality of the attempt to answer the question "what do we mean by Jewish American identity?", and "should be examined less for its coherence as a bond of literature *by* an identity as for its focus *on* it" (270). By quoting Stuart Hall, Grauer agrees that the concept of identity remains a useful term of analysis if we give up on thinking of it as a "transparent... already accomplished fact" and consider it as "never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (qtd. in Grauer 271). Contemporary Jewish American Literature is characterized,

according to Grauer, by "different representations of Jewish identity", which can be categorized in relation "to ritual, to memory, to place, to family, to sexuality, and to text, among numerous other possibilities" (273). Among all the themes listed above, Grauer decides to concentrate on two of them: (1) ritual and (2) place. She develops her arguments concerning the two themes as follows:

(1) Starting from Thomas Friedman's 1989 article "Back to Orthodoxy: The New Ethic and Ethnics in American Jewish Literature" Grauer argues that contemporary Jewish American Literature texts "are concerned not only with Orthodoxy per se, but more specifically with the *tensions between traditional Judaism and secularism*, feminism, and a gay or lesbian sexual orientation" (275, emphasis mine).

(2) Grauer argues that another theme that contemporary Jewish American writers have brought back in literature is that of homeland related to the "notion of Israel as a sacred homeland to which Jews in diaspora are longing to return." A confrontation with Israel that "Jewish American writers have, until very recently, largely ignored" comes back in the contemporary in the complicated relationship between "place and identity" (277).

Thirteen years after Grauer's essay, Jonathan Safran Foer published a novel that revolves around Jewish American identity including exactly those two categories chosen by Grauer as characteristic of the contemporary framework of Jewish American Literature. These two themes will be my starting point for the analysis of American Jewishness in this chapter. Jacob's American Jewishness in *Here I Am*, indeed, can be analyzed starting from two perspectives: (1) how Jacob perceives himself as a Jew in relation to rituality; (2) how Jacob perceives himself as a Jew in relation to Israel.

To understand how these two perspectives coalesce in the narrative that concerns Jacob we need to take a step back and understand how the novel is structured and where these two perspectives of the story develop.

We can think about the novel as developed in two main plots, one that is concerned with what happens inside the house of the Blochs, and that has everything to do with the dissolution of the marriage between Jacob and Julia and the consequences that this has on their children, and one that focuses more macroscopically on a disastrous earthquake in Israel that gives rise to a war in the Middle East between Islamic countries and Israel. The former plot taps into the tradition of the family novel (on which I will concentrate in the next chapter) while the latter into the tradition of the disaster novel.

The two threads interweave thanks to the arrival of Jacob's Israeli cousin Tamir and his son Barak in Washington right before the earthquake, and to the involvement of Tamir's son Noam in the war as a soldier and the consequences that this situation creates.

These two intertwined trajectories help clarify the reality of being an American Jew in the contemporary United States and how Jacob himself perceives it through the different situations he needs to face as an individual throughout the tale.

In the first part of the chapter, I will tackle the relationship between Jewishness and rituality in the domesticity of the Blochs, starting from the most important moments of Jewish rituality presented in the novel, namely Sam's bar mitzvah and Isaac's funeral. I will argue that the distinction I made between Jewishness and rituality is not fortuitous, but this distinction, indeed, encapsulates the antithetical approach of the family, very proud and attentive to creating a family

religion with its own rituality but not really interested and observant as far as Jewish law is concerned.

The second part of the chapter will be instead focused specifically on Jacob's relationship with Israel; the relationship between Jacob and Tamir – a character of paramount importance in the interweaving of the novel's main threads – brings out the opposition between being an Israeli Jew and being an American Jew. This difference problematizes Jacob's perception of America as his own homeland as it is presented as being in contrast with his being a Jew. The aim of this part of the chapter will be the analysis of how the negotiation between these two identities plays a critical role for Jacob and strongly affects his decisions late in the novel.

2.1 Being an American Jew: The Blochs as a Jewish Family and the Relationship with Rituality

To highlight the importance of Jewishness and rituality in *Here I Am* I will, once again, employ James Phelan's rhetorical approach. In *Experiencing Fiction: Judgements, Progressions and the Rhetorical Theory of Narrative* (2007),[4] Phelan explains how, according to a rhetorical perspective, "narrativity involves the interaction of two kinds of change: that experienced by the characters and that experienced by the audience in its developing responses to the characters' changes" (7). To account for both of these, Phelan relies on the notion of *progression*, which he explains as "the synthesis of both the textual dynamics that govern the movement of narrative from beginning through middle to end and the readerly dynamics […] that both follows and influence these dynamics" (3). Progression is made of three moments: beginning, middle, and ending. The beginning coincides with that moment that "generates the progression of the narrative by introducing unstable relationships between characters (instabilities) or between implied authors and authorial audience (tensions)" (16). In the identification of the beginning, however, we not only look for the moment that "initiates the action" but we are also exposed to elements that "influence our understanding of the narrative world, which in turn influences our understanding of the meaning and consequences of the action, including our

[4] For my analysis I concentrated on Phelan's most recent work about judgments and narrative progression; to have a broader perspective on his work on rhetorical narrative see also *Reading People, Reading Plots* (1988), *Narrative as Rhetoric* (1996), *Living to Tell about It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration* (2005) *Somebody Telling Somebody Else* (2017), and *Debating Rhetorical Narratology* (2020) written with Matthew Clark.

initial generic identification of the narrative and the expectations that follow from that identification" (16). The beginning, Phelan continues, is defined by four aspects, two "on the "aboutness" of the narrative", and two "on the activity of the authorial audience" (17). He labels these aspects as (1) *exposition*, (2) *launch*, (3) *initiation*, and (4) *entrance.* If we refer back to Phelan's notion of rhetorical narrativity as "interaction of two kinds of change" (7), it is clear how the aspects concerning the "readerly dynamics" are consequential to the in-text aspects.

For the sake of my analysis, I will look closely at what Phelan calls the *launch* and the *entrance.* He identifies the launch as "the revelation of the first set of global instabilities or tensions in the narrative" coincident with the moment in which, for the first time, the narrative establishes a "clear direction" (18). In *Here I Am* we can identify this moment with the finding at the Hebrew School of a paper with "bad words" allegedly written by Sam and the consequent confrontation Julia and Jacob have with rabbi Singer who questions Sam's legitimacy of having his bar mitzvah. This is the moment in the novel in which the ordinary, quiet life of the Blochs undergoes the first disruption that will, eventually, open to many other instabilities. Julia and Jacob are therefore presented in an uncomfortable position in dealing with the hypothetical disruption of their family's Jewish tradition. From this starting point, the theme of Jewishness and rituality takes shape and develops in the novel. What it means for Jacob to be a Jew is a building block of the contradictory elements that characterize the choices of the family in terms of Jewish rituality and following Jewish tradition. The clash between Jacob's Americanness and Jewishness and the resulting coalescing between these two identities in a more or less arbitrary

Jewish American identity is very important to understand Jacob and his way of going about life.

It is indeed from this same first chapter, "Get back to Happiness", that we start tackling the contradictory relation that Jacob especially, but the whole Bloch family in general, have with Jewishness and rituality.

We are immediately told that Jacob's sense of belonging to the Jewish community is far from being well-established, religiously speaking; as far as the question "Are you religious?" is concerned "he never knew how to answer" (11). His attachment to Jewishness is said to be related to "continuity (of history, culture, thought and values)" and to his wanting to believe in "a deeper meaning available not only to him but to his children and their children" (11).

We, as readers, find ourselves moving "from outside the text to a specific location in the authorial audience at the end of the launch" (this is what happens in what Phelan defines as *entrance*) pondering about the meaning of the *launch* as far as the "purpose of the whole narrative" (19) is concerned, and the trajectory concerning the meaning of Jewishness in the lives of the Blochs is undoubtedly one of the most upfront directions our hypothesis goes toward.

Not only the very first scene of the novel is set in a place that quintessentially represents Jewish education, but one of the cornerstones of Jewishness, namely the rite of passage from boyhood to adulthood, is immediately represented as problematic for the characters of the story.

From this beginning we enter the Blochs' way of going about Jewishness: the family goes through all the rituals related to Jewish tradition with little faith and attention for the rituality itself but as something that has to be done, something taken for granted that however seems irrevocable.

What is presented here from this very first chapter of the novel is an input for a reflection on a quite common condition of contemporary American Jews. This condition may be deemed to be reflective of the three-generation thesis, also known as Hansen's law: "what the son wishes to forget the grandson wishes to remember"(9). In the experience of third-generation immigrants, here specifically for American Jews, the clash between living a secular life and struggling to maintain the bond with Jewish identity is commonly recognized to be part and parcel of the contemporary Jewish experience.

In 2013, the Pew Research Center conducted a survey, "A Portrait of Jewish Americans", that supported the idea that "Jewish is changing in America" (8). The results of the survey, carried out among 3,475 Jews across the United States, showed how "one-in-five Jews (22%) now describe themselves as having no religion" (7) and that "62% say being Jewish is mainly a matter of ancestry and culture, while just 15% say it is mainly a matter of religion" (8). What is presented in the launch of the novel is, therefore, not a representation of an idiosyncratic stance on American Jewishness, but rather a common situation that here evidences its contradictory aspects starting from this first instability. To be a Jew is not a choice, it is something that one, from Jacob's point of view (a perspective partly shared by Julia), cannot even pretend not to know; for Julia, the reason for them wanting Sam to have his bar mitzvah is for "Sam to know that he's Jewish" (11), and to this suggestion, Jacob's answer ("Is there any chance of him not knowing that?" 11) gives us an idea of what he later explains; the inevitability of Jewishness is what characterizes Jacob as a Jew, Jacob is a Jew because he has no choice but to be one, and this has nothing to do with religion.

In contrast with this distrust of the meaning of Jewish rituality (that is, hypocritically followed even if emptied of its religious meaning), Jacob and Julia seem to be somehow obsessed with the idea of rituality, of the creation of some kind of personal religion for them and their family but that is somehow still related to Jewishness. In this obsession for the creation of a so-called religion, however, we still witness the failure of this religion, which takes different shapes throughout the years of Jacob and Julia's marriage and evolves as the family evolves, but resolves in something that the two seem unable to hold together. Interestingly, the description of the creation of this family religion follows the contradictory description of Jacob's perspective on Jewishness. We are told that from the very beginning of their relationship, Jacob and Julia try to establish a "religion for two" (11) and this is immediately introduced as a pagan version of a Jewish ritual, as it is defined as "Their Shabbat" (11). Paradoxically, in the failure of this secularized rituality created by them, in this non-religious religion, they turn out to "hold on what they could, and tried not to acknowledge how *secular* they had become" (12) (emphasis mine); the semantic field of religion is here part and parcel of the description of this aspect of Julia and Jacob's life even if we have just been told that Jacob is hard put to define himself as religious.

Then we are told how the birth of Sam first, then Max and Benjy have been seen by their parents as a renewal of this faulty familiar religion, and the evolution of the ritualities as the possibility to have a new chance for establishing what is deemed so important by Julia and Jacob in their familiar bond.

At the end of the description of these familiar religions, the sacred and the profane end up coalescing once again in Jacob and Julia's need for some sort of rituality, this time turning to Jewish rituality itself, for the maintenance of what

seems to be so important for them in what may be termed the validation of the family. Sam's bar mitzvah in this case is not only something that has to do with the inheritance of Jewishness but also is deemed to be "the final thread of the frayed tether" (15), the last chance for that "religion for five" to survive; and this is indicative of how much Julia and Jacob need it rather than Sam himself, so much so that we are told that:

> To snip it, as Sam so badly wanted, and as Jacob was now suggesting against his own real need, would send not just Sam but the family floating off into an emptiness- more than enough oxygen to last life, but what kind of life? (15)

The image used in this passage is very dramatic: before this event is identified with that strong image of the "frayed tether", we are presented with the creation of "emptiness", an emptiness that does not kill but deprives life of its meaning. This is the extent to which this event really counts for this family, even for Jacob who, in taking Sam's side in the contentious matter and suggesting to cancel the ritual, is actually going against what is defined as "his own real need."

There is another event that happens much later in the novel and that is of paramount importance to understanding Jacob in relation to his idea of Jewishness and his relationship with the Jewish law: the death and the funeral of his grandfather Isaac.

Before entering into detail about what happens after Isaac's death, I believe it is important to establish what is Isaac's function in the novel. Even if the novel focuses mainly on the dynamics inside the nuclear family represented by Jacob, Julia, and their children, many aspects of intergenerational confrontation can be detected while reading Foer's novel. In this perspective, Isaac represents the

forgotten patriarch of this Jewish American family. The incipit of the novel is, indeed, dedicated to a dense summary of the voyage that brought Isaac, and thus the Blochs, from Europe to The United States. Nevertheless, Isaac as a character remains for the most part in the background of *Here I Am*, functioning mainly as a symbolical rather than actual presence. Isaac's Bildung from the persecution of the Nazis to the new life "on the other side of an ocean he would never wholly cross" (3) results in a condition of abandonment by his family and indolence toward life itself.[5] Representing the last glimmer of Jewish history for the Blochs, the last trace of that past still anchored in Judaism, Holocaust, and immigration, Isaac's end of life represents the risk of losing that heritage once for all.

When Isaac dies (from suicide as we will only later discover), in an attempt to prevent the risk aforementioned from happening, the family tries to honor Isaac's last wish and bury him in Israel. The dramatical situation created by the earthquake, however, does not allow the Blochs to satisfy their patriarch's last wish, leaving them, especially Jacob, in a stalemate between hoping to find a way to bury Isaac in Israel and giving up and have the funeral in the US. The handling of this situation and eventually the performing of the actual funeral tells us a lot about the relationship between Jacob and Jewishness in general and Jewish rituality in particular. To illuminate these aspects I will divide the analysis into two main moments, the one right after the discovery of Isaac's death, and the one

[5] In the incipit of the novel the condition of the objects in Isaac's house are the objective correlative of his life and contribute to giving the reader the idea of the condition of abandonment and indolence I mentioned ("ten pounds of Roman Vishniac *bleaching* on the coffee table; Enemies, A Love Story *demagnetizing* in the world's last functional VCR; egg salad *becoming bird flu* in a refrigerator *mummified* with photographs" (3-4, emphasis mine).

of the actual funeral and the rituality that Jacob and his father Irv are supposed to "perform."

The first moment is characterized by the postponement of the funeral and the final decision of having the funeral in the US. Halfway into the novel, everything seems to fall apart; at the very end of the third section of the novel, "Uses of a Jewish Fist", among all the events that are happening, the evident dissolution of the marriage between Jacob and Julia and the news about the earthquake in Israel, Julia breaks the sudden news of Isaac's death to Jacob. From this moment on the family follows the Jewish ritual of *shmira,* the ritual of "watching over the body of a dead person prior to burial" ("Shmira", def.2 [Jewish English Lexicon]) in which the body of the dead is expected to be never left alone. In the Jewish tradition, this period is deemed to be very important as it represents the period necessary for "honoring the dead (k'vod hamet)" (Alcalay Klug). In Isaac's case, however, as I have already mentioned before, the period is prolonged for more than usual due to the situation in Israel and the impossibility to realize Isaac's last wish of being buried there. In the narrator's presentation of such an impossibility, we already have a hint of the distance between the religious meaning of honoring the body of the dead and what is happening in the case of Isaac's body; the expected moment of the transfer of Isaac's body from America to Israel is described as "when the time came to drop Isaac's body in the mailbox" (363), an image that downgrades the sacred body of the dead to a lexicon associated to packages and objects. We are told that in this period Jacob "accepted the brunt of the responsibility, because he considered himself the most able to do so, and because he most strongly wanted to escape other responsibilities"(363), and even in this sentence we can read how the sacrality of the rite is not lived by

Jacob as such, it is a way out for avoiding his responsibilities. And indeed, what he does in the several hours in which he is a *shmira sitter* has everything to do with distracting himself (buying books, writing, listening to podcasts) and nothing to do with honoring the body of his dead grandfather, neither in a religious nor in a secular way.

The narrator also takes an ironic stance in explaining how the perpetual presence of at least one of Isaac's family members (or, in general, *shmira sitters*) is in contrast with the abandonment that he was experiencing at the end of his life:

> The *patriarch* with whom they begrudgingly skyped for seven minutes once a week was now someone they visited daily. By some uniquely *Jewish magic*, the transition from living to dead transformed the perpetually ignored into the never to be forgotten. (363) (emphasis mine)

The stress is on the hypocritical behavior of Jacob and his family in being more present for Isaac now than they were when he was alive: the choice of the words ironically mingles terms belonging to Jewishness and paganism, referring to Isaac as the *patriarch* and attributing this change of behavior to something related to a strange mixture of Jewishness and magic, referring it as "some uniquely Jewish magic."

Nevertheless, the image of Isaac's dead body is not completely indifferent in Jacob's eyes, the *shmira* sittings are surely far from being religious but the idea of seeing the body, as suggested by Max to his father, is something that frightens Jacob, something that he associates with his Jewish legacy, with his history. Isaac is described as "the embodiment of Jacob's history; his people's psychological pantry, the shelves collapsed; his heritage of incomprehensible strength and incomprehensible weakness" (368-369), and now "the embodiment of Jacob's

history was only a body" (369), and this is what makes Jacob afraid of the encounter with the body. And for Jacob, "his grandfather's body couldn't be only a body" (370). In this episode and in Jacob's behavior, we find again what it means for Jacob to be a Jew, the importance of "continuity (of history, culture, thought and values)" that goes against his indecisiveness in defining himself as religious.

And it is exactly this lack of religiosity that emerges at Isaac's funeral. After having waited for long to try to "fulfill Isaac's unambiguous wish for his eternal resting place" (370), Jacob decides to give up and organize his grandfather's funeral in the United States, in Judean Gardens "a very ordinary, pretty-enough cemetery about thirty minutes outside the city" (393). The reason for such a decision, we are told, "didn't matter all that much" even if we are given some reasons that might have led Jacob to it ("whether he was persuaded by his father's pragmatism, or was tired of reorganizing his life to spend time with a dead body, or was too preoccupied with the burial of his family to keep up the fight" 393).

The day of the funeral is characterized by the appearance of a new character in the novel, a "new" rabbi in replacement of Rabbi Auerbach, "who'd known Isaac for several decades" but had a stroke a month before Isaac's death. The replacement, "a young, disheveled, smart, or maybe dumb recent product of wherever rabbis are made" (411), plays a key role in the unfolding of the rituality of the funeral and in the dialogue with Irv and Jacob about such rituality.

> "There are a few ritualistic-"
>
> "Save your words. We're not a religious family."
>
> "It probably depends on what is meant by religious", the rabbi said.

> "It probably doesn't", Jacob corrected him, either in his dad's defense or in the absence of God's.
> "And our stance is a choice," Irv said. "Not laziness, not assimilation, not inertia."
> "I respect that," the rabbi said.
> "We're as good as any Jews." (411-412)

In this passage father and son are very clear in defining themselves as non-religious but at the same time they still define themselves as Jews, the two concepts are non-related, to be a Jew has nothing to do with religion, has everything to do with identity and not being religious makes them not "as good as any human beings" but "as good as any Jews"; it does not take off anything in their Jewishness according to them, because Jewishness and Judaism are unrelated in Jacob and Irv's minds.

However, in the following passage, these two concepts seem to reunite, and in this reunion, Jacob and Irv seem to be excluded.

> The rabbi walked the two of them through a few of the small rituals that, while entirely voluntary, they would be expected to perform in order to ensure Isaac's proper passage *into whatever's Jews believe in*. (412) (emphasis mine)

These rituals are completely extraneous to the two men, and yet, they are fundamental for the transition into "whatever's Jews believe in"; this expression that we can associate with Jacob's focalization, gives a strong connotation of extraneity, of something in which neither Jacob nor Irv, even if they just defined themselves as Jews, belong to.

This is emphasized even more in the following page when the ritual performed by the rabbi is described as "ridiculous" (413) and it is indulged only because Irv "wanted to bury his father according to the Jewish law and tradition" (413). Again, the behavior of the Blochs is controversial as far as rituality is concerned; they feel it as silly, ridiculous, they do not have any belief in that but they still justify themselves by deeming those rituals as necessary. Why perpetuate a rituality that is empty of beliefs? Because, as for Sam's bar mitzvah, not perpetuating this rituality would imply that this family, and the family in its Jewish identity especially, would "[float] off into an emptiness" (15).

Moreover, we also witness how this contradictory approach does not only apply to these rituals but characterizes an entire life, in Irv's case. We are told that "He didn't believe in God" and that his choice was justified by his thinking of it as a "foolishness" that he could not take even if it might "have opened him to badly needed comfort." But, paradoxically, we are also told that his life, and especially moments of his life involving his son Jacob, had had moments in which religiosity (not belief as the narrator specifies) had been present in the form of prayer.

> When Deborah went into labor, *Irv prayed to no one* that she and the baby would be safe. When Jacob was born, *he prayed to no one* that his son long outlive him, and acquire more knowledge and self-knowledge than him, and experience greater happiness. At Jacob's bar mitzvah, Irv stood at the ark and *said a prayer of gratitude to no one* that trembled, then broke, then exploded into something so beautifully unrestrained and full-throated that he was left with no voice to deliver his speech at the party. When he and Deborah didn't read the book they were staring at the waiting room of George Washington

> Hospital, and Jacob almost pushed the doors off the hinges, his face covered in tears, his scrubs covered in blood, and did his best to form the words, "You have a grandson," Irv closed his eyes, but not to darkness, and *said a prayer to no one* without any content, only force. *The sum of those no ones was the King of the Universe*. He'd spent enough of his life wrestling foolishness. Now, at the cemetery, all wrestling felt foolish. (412) (emphasis mine)

We have just been told that Irv is certain in his definition of himself as non-religious, yet here religiosity occurs repeatedly. Why would someone who does not believe in God decide to pray in the moments of paramount importance in his and his son's lives? What is the meaning of Irv's "prayers to no one"? What we are told here is even more preposterous than the approach we have been immersed so far because if rituality can be associated with tradition, with an idea of tradition as history rather than religious belief, an idea that is in keeping with that approach that Jacob has about his conception of being a Jew, here these moments of religiosity are separated from rituality, are attached to moments in which Irv needed something, needed comfort or hope from the outside, and what he decided to do is to pray. The "foolishness" of believing in God he wrestled against for most of his life seems now to be what "might have opened him to badly needed comfort": it is in the realization of this need that Irv feels "foolish", not in his incapability of believing but in having made of this incapability his case, a principle to live by.

The encounter with the rabbi at his grandfather's funeral turns out to be decisive in Jacob's trajectory as we are eventually told that Jacob decided to partly reconcile with the religious side of Jewishness, and study Judaism under the guidance of the young rabbi. Nonetheless, this return to Judaism is still far from

being an actual conversion; during the phone call with Julia (the Bible, "How to play the intersection of love, anger, and fear of death"), this choice that, in Julia's eyes, makes of Jacob "*some* Jew", is enigmatically commented by Jacob himself, that remarks "I don't believe any of it, but I believe in it" (609).

The analysis of these passages demonstrates the paradox intrinsic to the way the Blochs approach rituality in relation to Jewishness; it is evident how the notion of Jewishness is something that goes beyond the idea of religion for the family; however, the tradition that is held by rituals, even if not enriched by the sacred meaning it is supposed to have, is not given up but maintained for its historical value, for the maintenance of that "continuity" mentioned in the first chapter.

To understand what this continuity implies and to delineate Jacob's image of Jewishness, we need to take a further step and enter the relationship between him and Tamir, which introduces the confrontation between two antipodal perspectives.

2.2 Being an American Jew: the Relationship with Israel and the Confrontation with Israeli Jews

With Tamir's arrival, we are presented a different perspective on the quest of Jewishness in *Here I Am,* which is not only related to the relationship between rituality, identity, and religiosity but also to geography, or, to be more precise, to Israel as the homeland. In analyzing this aspect, which contrasts the identity of the Israeli Jew and the one of the American Jew, it is of paramount importance to analyze how the paradoxical identities are represented by Tamir and Jacob, who will ultimately question his stance influenced by his cousin's opinion. What this confrontation brings up is the issue of Jewish people's sense of belonging, confronting once again the diaspora in their feeling both insiders and outsiders.

As remarked by Grauer, contemporary Jewish American literature reflects on Israel both as a "real place" and as a "mythic space", which "allows for a wide range of contesting narratives of Jewish identity"(""A Drastically Bifurcated Legacy": Homeland and Jewish Identity in Contemporary Jewish American Literature" 242). The narratives referred to have everything to do with the notion of homeland, and the negotiations of a Jewish homeland as "varyingly in relation to birthplace, country of familial origin, spiritual heritage, and what George Steiner calls the ''dwelling-place of the script''—or an ostensible ''at-homeness'' in the book"[6] (242). It is exactly this kind of negotiation "between the actual and the metaphoric", that characterizes the relationship between Jacob and Tamir in *Here I Am*.

[6] Grauer refers to George Stainer's "Our Homeland, the Text" (1985), where for "dwelling-place of the script" he means that "wherever in the world a Jew reads and meditates Torah is the true Israel" (5)

As briefly mentioned, the Israeli cousins, Tamir and his son Barak, are visiting the Blochs in Washington DC and as soon as Tamir is introduced as a character, even from a purely physical standpoint, he is presented in opposition to Jacob's features, whose physical appearance has not been presented before and takes shape in this doppelganger-like introduction. Here is how Tamir is introduced at the very beginning of the fifth chapter of part III of the novel, "Here Comes the Israelis!":

> The surprise upon seeing him never diminished. He was someone with whom Jacob shared more genetic material than just about anyone else on earth, and yet how many passersby would guess they were related? His skin color could be explained by exposure to the sun, and the differences in their builds attributed to diet and exercise and willpower, but what about his sharp jaw, his overhanging brow, the hair on his knuckles and head? What about the size of his feet, his perfect eyesight, his ability to grow a full beard while a bagel toasted? (279)

Their different looks question the kinship between the cousins; the description of Tamir's features (and the implicit description of Jacob's features in contrast with his cousin's) has a subtext that is emphasized by the details taken into consideration in the description: masculinity (an undertone that haunts Jacob throughout the novel). Tamir is described as tanned, muscular, with a sharp jaw, perfect sight and hairy body, and a full beard, all features that can be associated with the ideal of the masculine figure in his essential status, a figure that has control of his surroundings and that gained that control through physicality, somehow a figure that is described, if positively, as the primordial man. Jacob, on the other hand, takes the other side of this description in what turns out to be

a demeaning perspective on his masculinity (Jacob's focalization is upfront in this description).

We then take a further step in understanding the difference between the cousins when we are told that "someone like Jacob could write about someone like Tamir" (280); Tamir is presented as the active one, the one who has a way of going about living that is worth being observed and written about while Jacob is the observer, the one who would take Tamir in consideration as a character as if to tell us that Jacob's life, his personality, and his choices, can be deemed as unexciting in comparison with Tamir's. Some pages later, this position is reinforced when we are told how Jacob envies Tamir not only physically but also for his attitude toward life and, most of all, toward fear; after the alleged episode involving Steven Spielberg, the doubt of his being actually circumcised and Tamir asking him about it (the veracity of the episode is not essential as far as Jacob's perception of Tamir is concerned), we are told about Jacob embracing Tamir, not for having gathered the information about Spielberg's penis but because Tamir "had all the qualities that Jacob lacked and didn't want but desperately missed: the brashness, the fearless where fear was not required, the fearlessness where fear *was* required, the giving of no shits" (290). From this perspective, we understand that Jacob does not really want to be like Tamir, but he is somehow fascinated by his way of being; he recognizes that he has something he lacks.

However, this unbalanced comparison between the two characters takes a different shape when, through the use of prolepsis, we are told something that not only pools the two together but also problematizes the relationship between them and everything that we will witness as readers from that moment on. After

Tamir's initial physical description, we are told about how he and Jacob did not see each other for a long time and about the fact that, notwithstanding, the two kept in touch. However, this exchange between the two cousins has a particularity; we are initially told that Jacob "had sent Tamir only good news, much of it embellished, some of it plainly false" (280). In the same way, although we know nothing about Tamir yet, we are also told that "as it turned out, Tamir had been doing his own share of embellishing and lying, but it would take a war to make the truth known" (280). This sentence is relevant for two distinct reasons: (1) it is proleptical factually-wise: it anticipates a war we have not witnessed yet, a war we have no clue about; (2) it immediately problematizes the relationship between Tamir and Jacob, telling from the very arrival of the Israelis how it is based on lies, even if, as far as lies are concerned, they do not come out of malice but out of wanting to be perceived in a certain way. From Tamir's first appearance in the novel, we are told about a moment in the future of the novel in which Tamir's concealment will be unmasked. As readers, we find ourselves in two different positions regarding Jacob and Tamir; halfway in the novel, we know Jacob, his interiority is upfront for most of the novel, and we are aware of the aspects of his life that need concealment. On the other hand, we have just met Tamir, and the only thing we know of him is that probably most of what we will witness from this moment on will be partially or totally false. This aspect is very significant in our reading of Jacob and Tamir's relationship; what will follow will be much more relevant as far as Jacob's interiority is concerned, how he will react to Tamir's behavior, and how he will mirror his identity in comparison with Tamir's will tell us much more of Jacob's identity as an American Jew than about Tamir.

The relationship between the two cousins develops from these premises and the opposition between the American Jew and the Israeli Jew takes shape according to the cousins' different perspectives. One of the very first conversations between Jacob, Tamir, and Irv gives us already a hint of how the two look differently at Israel and Jewishness in the definition of homeland; when rhetorically asking Jacob where one could find the best Italian food, Tamir, after the cousin's obvious answer ("Italy?" 282), oddly contradicts him answering "Israel", explaining then how the best Italian food in the world would be found in Israel, including Italy in this survey. To justify his weird answer, Tamir starts a reasoning that shows us how the two cousins have different perspectives related to the notion of the Jewish homeland:

> "Let me ask you something," Tamir said. "Where do they make the best bagels in the world?"
> "New York."
> "I agree. The best bagels in the world are being made in New York. Now let me ask you: Is a bagel a Jewish food?"
> "Depends on what you mean by that."
> "Is a bagel a Jewish food in the same way that pasta is an Italian food?"
> "In a similar way."
> "And let me ask you: Is Israel the Jewish homeland?"
> "Israel is the Jewish state."
> Tamir straightened in his seat.
> "That wasn't the part of my argument you were supposed to disagree with."
> Irv shot Jacob a look. "Of course it's the Jewish homeland."
> "It depends on what you mean by homeland," Jacob said. "If you mean ancestral homeland-"

"What do you mean?" Tamir asked.

"I mean the place my family comes from."

"Which is?"

"Galicia."

"But before that."

"What, Africa?"

Irv let his voice drip like molasses, but not sweet: "Africa, Jacob?"

"It's arbitrary. We could go back to trees, or the ocean, if we wanted. Some go back to Eden. You pick Israel. I pick Galicia."

"You feel Galician?"

"I feel American."

"I feel Jewish," Irv said. (283)

Irv partially mediates the disagreement between Jacob and Tamir, but the identities related to the opinion of each of the characters' sense of belonging from this conversation are clearly distinctive.

In her essay "In Search of a Mother Tongue: Locating Home in Diaspora," Sophia Lehman identifies among the issues Jewish American writers confront after WWII what she calls "a different form of double alienation in the form of a double diaspora: first from the symbolic and biblical homeland of Palestine, and then again after the Holocaust and the death of both German-Jewish and Yiddish culture"(101) This definition of double diaspora helps us interpreting the conversation between the two cousins: Tamir's perspective is strictly related to the redefinition of diaspora that the creation of the State of Israel has brought, seeing Israel "a contemporary national homeland to which [Jews] could emigrate, rather than, as previously, a symbolical biblical homeland of the past"(111), while Jacob recognizes the United States as his homeland but when

asked which he recognizes as his ancestral homeland, from where his family comes from, he answers "Galicia."

These two perspectives will be center stage from this moment on as far as the relationship between Tamir and Jacob is concerned. Jacob feels American but at the same time does not entirely deny his Jewish roots, if, as we have already seen, more with a historical perspective rather than a religious one. Tamir, on the other hand, "believes" in the unity of all Jews and thinks all Jews should recognize Israel as their homeland, and eventually consider as the ultimate goal to go back to Israel, so much so that he seems to allude to Israeli Jews as being somehow superior to others (Tamir seems to convey an idea of Israeli Jew as what we can call the "authentic jew"). The two cousins negotiate the definition of what is implied in the notion of being a Jew. Among these two different positions, Irv intervenes presenting a third perspective belonging to someone who deems that Jewishness prevents him from feeling either American or Israeli and who thinks the only way he can define himself is as Jewish. Yet, he lacks a sense of belonging to a given homeland (Irv seems to quintessentially represent Lehman's definition of "double alienation in the form of a double diaspora" 101).

The effect of the encounter at the airport's bathroom between Steven Spielberg and Jacob tells us something more about the Jewish identity Jacob recognizes himself as belonging to; we are first told how Spielberg, for any Jew of Jacob's age, was a landmark, but what is more important in Spielberg's work is the impact of *Schindler's list*:

> Not until he makes *Schindler's list*, at which point he is not even he anymore, but representative of *them*. *Them*? The murdered millions. No, Jacob thought, representative of *us*. The Unmurdered. But *Schindler* wasn't for *us*. It was for

> *them*. *Them*? Not the Murdered, of course. They couldn't watch movies. It was for all of them who weren't *us*: the goyim. Because with Spielberg, into whose bank account the general public was compelled to make annual deposits, we finally had a way to force them to look at our absence, to rub their noses in the German shepherd's shit. (285)

Jacob decides to highlight the importance of *Schindler's list* in terms of a sense of belonging, and to do so, he needs to create a clear-cut polarization; his identifying as a Jew is strictly related to the Holocaust, and it is in Schindler's list's strength to make goyim "rub their noses in the German shepherd's shit" that he recognizes the value of the movie. It is interesting to notice how Jacob stresses that it is important not because it makes people who are not Jews realize what those murdered have had to go through. Still, it is essential because it makes them realize the burden of those who have not been murdered, those who have inherited that sufferance. This is part and parcel of Jacob's idea of what it means to be a Jew, and this is also why in his disbelief toward god and religion, in his complete non-involvement in Judaism and its rituality, he still feels the burden of the Jewish identity.

In chapter "Who's in the unoccupied room?" of part V, "Not to have a choice is also a choice", Jacob explicitly unfolds what was anticipated earlier as the core of his Jewish identity; in the aftermath of Isaac's funeral, Jacob and Tamir find themselves alone drinking beers and "smoking pot" from a pipe made out of an apple by Tamir. After having revealed to Tamir his secret digital affair with a coworker (Jacob's confrontation with masculinity returns when he first pretends to have slept with his coworker to reveal at a later time the truth), Jacob and his

cousin start a conversation about life as adults and about how life after childhood becomes "pushing things around" (492):

> "People shouldn't be allowed to get married until it's too late to have kids."
> "Maybe you can get enough signatures to make that happen."
> "And having a gratifying career is impossible."
> "For anyone?"
> "For good fathers. But it's so hard to deviate. All these fucking Jewish nails driven through my palms."
> "Jewish nails?"
> "Expectations. Prescriptions. Commandments. Wanting to please everyone. And the rest of them."
> "Them?"
> "Did you ever have to read that poem, or journal entry, or whatever, by the kid who died in Auschwitz? Or maybe Treblinka? Not really important detail, I just… The one about 'Next time you throw a ball, throw it for me'?"
> "No."
> "Really?"
> "I don't think so."
> "Consider yourself lucky. Anyway, I might not be getting it exactly right, but the gist is: don't mourn for me, live for me. I'm about to get gassed, so do me a favor and have fun.
> "Never heard it."
> "I must have heard it a thousand times. It was the theme song of my Jewish education, and it ruined everything. Not because every time you throw a ball you're thinking of the corpse of a kid who should have been you, but because sometimes you just want to veg out in front of shitty TV, and instead you think, 'I should really go throw a ball.'"

> Tamir laughed.
>
> "It's funny, except that throwing a ball becomes an attitude toward academic achievement, becomes measuring the distance from perfection in units of failure, becomes going to a college that murdered kid would have killed to go to, becomes studying things you aren't interested in but are good and worthy and remunerative, becomes getting married Jewishly and having Jewish kids and living Jewishly in some demented effort to redeem the suffering that made your increasingly alienating life possible." (493-494)

In this passage, Jacob speaks about his identity as a Jew, starting from a poem he deems to have been fundamental for his Jewish education since he was a child, a sort of mantra, "the theme song of [his] Jewish education". It is the same concept that he tried to explain when exalting Spielberg's *Schindler's List*, that component that characterizes the life of the Jews and that non-Jews cannot understand: the idea that for someone whose life has been so uncertain because death had been so close to his ancestors, there is no other way than to see life as a gift and feeling the necessity to dignify it, which does not mean to live it to the fullest, but, instead, means to live it according to how the other, "The Murdered", would have decided to live it. This idea that is the burden of the privilege, the privilege of being among the "Unmurdered", characterizes all the steps of the life of a Jew according to Jacob, becomes "measuring the distance from perfection in units of failure" and doing everything "in some demented effort to redeem the suffering that made your increasingly alienating life possible". This seems to be the unfolding of what we were presented as Jacob's idea of "continuity (of history, culture, thought and values)", but with the elimination of the element of choice that originally was present, it is not something Jacob "wanted" but an

unescapable trajectory of the life of a Jew, something that is everything but the result of free will and it is also deemed as what "ruined everything" for him.

From this premise, Jacob goes on to debunk the model he has grown up with:

> "The problem is," Jacob said, taking back the apple, "the fulfillment of the expectations feels amazing, but you only fulfill them once – 'I got an A!' 'I'm getting married!' 'it's a boy!' and then you're left to experience them. Nobody knows it at the time, and everybody knows it later, but nobody admits it, because it would pull a foundational log to the Jewish tower of Jenga. You trade emotional ambition for companionship, a life of inhabiting a nerve-filled body for companionship, exploration for companionship. There's a good in commitment, I know. Things have to grow over time, mature, become full. But there's a price, and just because we don't talk about it doesn't mean it's endurable. So many blessings, but did anyone ever stop to ask why one would want a blessing?" (494)

Jacob depicts the construction of the life of a Jew as revolving around achievements that are prearranged and superficial, functional only to be "a foundational log to the Jewish tower of Jenga", but that lead the individual to give up everything for the sake of commitment. The Jewish predicament seems inescapable because not only it forces one to choose what is deemed to be important from a Jewish perspective about the privilege of entering the category of the "Unmurdered" but also because it leaves no way out, no space for change or complains, becoming an unspeakable truth.

If we look back at the setting of the scene just analyzed, another contemporary Jewish American work comes to mind for the similarities presented: Nathan

Englander's short story "What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank", in the eponymous short story collection published in 2012.

The confrontation between American Jews and Israeli Jews is upfront in Englander's short story as it is in *Here I Am*. In both cases, the revelatory moment is oddly related to the effects of cannabis (the presence of a pipe made out of an apple might suggest a sort of tribute Foer pays to Englander even if the author never explicitly mentioned it)[7]. In the relationship between Mark and Lauren (renamed Yerucham and Shoshana), the couple that lives in Jerusalem and is visiting South Florida, and the unnamed first-person narrator and his wife Deb in "What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank," we can see many parallels with the relationship between Tamir and Jacob (not specifically in the "pot scene" but generally throughout the novel). The unnamed narrator employed by Englander resembles Jacob's judging attitude toward Tamir and introduces his guests by saying, "Mark and Lauren live in Jerusalem, and people from there think it gives them the right" (3). Mark, on the other hand, resembles Tamir in judging life in America as easier, with no troubles at all (Tamir says "Jacob, you really don't have enough problems" (474) and Mark, referring to living in South Florida, says, "We'd have no troubles at all" (3)).

[7] Jonathan Safran Foer and Nathan Englander collaborated on a new edition of the sacred Jewish *Haggadah* that Foer edited and Englander translated. Penguin ultimately published it in 2012 (the same year of the publication of Englander's short story collection). Foer described *What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank* as "Englander's wisest, funniest, bravest, and most beautiful book. It overflows with revelations and gems", and Englander's first works as inspirational because they "suggested something was possible that [he] didn't know before: a young Jewish American, writing about the experience of Orthodox Judaism – and other kinds of American and Jewish experiences – in a way that [he] recognized and that didn't feel corny or sentimental but just the opposite"("In Conversation: Nathan Englander and Jonathan Safran Foer"). Even if the tribute Foer seems to pay to Englander in this scene of *Here I Am* has never been confirmed by the author, the closeness between the authors (not only metaphorical but also physical, as Englander said Foer's house was "one mile straight down the road from mine") and the esteem Foer has shown for Englander's works make this parallel highly plausible.

What is worth looking at, as far as *Here I Am* is concerned, is how the short story relates to the Holocaust and how American Jews and Israeli Jews relate to the event differently. I argue that what emerges from "What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank" is similar to what we have discussed about American Jewishness. The image of the American Jew represented in both these works is that of a Jew that is still in debt with their historical and traditional heritage. At the same time, the Israeli Jew is defined as entitled, somehow, to be considered the ultimate Jew in his having returned to the Promised Land. As the young rabbi argued in the speech during Isaac's funeral, the image of the American Jew indeed is the one of a Jew with *The Diary of Anne Frank* as his bible.

Deb, the narrator's wife in Englander's short story, is said to have an "unhealthy obsession that [Holocaust survivors] generation is gone" (8), and her obsession is associated with her education:

> "It's like she's a survivor's kid, my wife. It's crazy, that education they give them. Her grandparents were all born in the Bronx, but it's like, I don't know. It's like here we are twenty minutes from downtown Miami, but really it's 1937 and we live on the edge of Berlin. It's astounding." (12)

On the other hand, Mark believes that "you can't build Judaism only on the foundation of one terrible crime"[8] (22) and argues how in America (he refers explicitly to the surroundings of Deb and the narrator's house) Holocaust represents "a necessary sign of identity" (22).

[8] Englander's short story does not distinguish Jewishness from Judaism as Foer does in *Here I Am*; characters in the short story seem to share a religious idea of Jewishness, while Foer's feelings, as explained in the first part of the chapter, develop their paradoxical Jewish identities exactly in the separation between Jewishness and Judaism.

What comes out from the conversation between the Israeli couple and the American couple in "What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank" reflects exactly two different stances that emerge from the relationship between Jacob and Tamir and their different thoughts on Jewish identity. The question of the homeland is of paramount importance in this disagreement: as anticipated in one of the first dialogues between Jacob and Tamir, Tamir's idea of Jewishness is strongly related to Israel and the concept of Aliyah, Israel is the Jewish home, and every Jew should aspire to "go back" there (he repeatedly tells Jacob "You need to come home" (502)); Jacob, on the other hand, associates Jewishness with history and tradition and this perspective cannot be separated from the Holocaust and the responsibility of memory. Jacob's life as a Jew is characterized by his idea of not being "worthy of all that came before [him]" (497) and his actions, both as a man and as a Jew (the two notions are presented as inseparable), are led by this inferiority complex, but this does not lead him to rethink his homeland, he always feels American. I argue that in *Here I Am*, Foer develops a different definition of what in Philip Roth's *The Counterlife* is defined as "The American-Jewish inferiority complex" (146); if in Roth's novel, this definition is related to the idea that "American Jewish are vaguely confused and defensively silent about their ongoing American existence when confronting with the reality of Israel" (Grauer, 238), in *Here I Am* it is much less related to Israel and much more related to the heritage of the Holocaust.

Starting from these two extreme and different opinions, the conversation between Tamir and Jacob eventually opens to revelations; Tamir confesses to Jacob that his visit to the United States had not the aim of attending Sam's bar mitzvah but of looking for a place for him and his family to move from Israel to

America (the exact opposite of Aliyah, that Tamir renames "hayila" (449)), showing how that idea that is reinforced throughout the novel of his attachment to Israel (and especially his exaltation of any aspect of Israeli life) is indeed only a façade (the core of that "embellishing and lying" (280) we were told right after Tamir's appearance in the novel). At the same time, Jacob decides instead to accept the Israeli Prime Minister's invitation to "come home" (526) to support Israel during the war (as a sort of reversal to his perceiving America as his homeland).

In revealing the paradoxicalities in both characters' identities, and the weaknesses of their claimed identities (that of the Israeli Jew that believes in Aliyah for Tamir, that of the American Jew for whom Jewishness is related to tradition rather than to his link with Israel for Jacob) these revelations lead to dead ends. The Israeli crisis caused by the earthquake and the consequent war prevents Tamir from thinking about abandoning his homeland and reinstalls his patriotic sentiment shorn of all the romanticized lies; Jacob's impulsive decision of going to Israel turns out to have nothing to do with Jewishness and everything to do with the end of his marriage and his need to hear Julia telling him "Don't Go" (511). This tells us how the positions of the two characters do not change substantially but show the instability, the non-univocal nature that is at the basis of the characters in *Here I Am.* Once again, the result of such negotiations seems to leave Jacob as the only character who does not grow in the novel. If Tamir's inauthenticity develops in what looks like an authentic love for his family and his country that sounds like a "Here I Am" for what is worth in his life, Jacob seems unable to choose as strong as Tamir's.

3. Paradoxical Identities within the Context of the Family Novel in *Here I Am*

As anticipated in the second chapter, one of the main literary categories *Here I Am* can be associated with is that of the *family novel*. Even though this categorization may be evident even for readers who do not have an interest in narrative theory, if we analyze Robert Boyer's 1974 definition of this genre we find substantial evidence that proves how the novel belongs in this sub-genre, well beyond the mere idea of the representation of a domestic environment:

> In speaking of the family novel we speak not merely of a work the burden of which is to deal with the various number of some family. Such a work is likely to focus attention on one family member more or less at the expense of others, whether because the one character is superior by virtue of intelligence, capacity of self-conscious reflection, or flair for self-dramatization, or because the novelist wishes to make certain points about loneliness, the difficulty of achieving independence, or some such thing, which requires that he deliberately limit his focus. (1)

Boyer's definition of family novel pivots on the idea of a limited focalization on one of the members of the family, stressing the aim of mainly representing one interiority "at the expense of others" in the domestic context. This definition works perfectly in the attempt to define *Here I Am* as a family novel starting from one of the features highlighted in the first chapter: provided that the family novel is characterized by the prioritization of one interiority who is said to be "superior by virtue of intelligence, capacity of self-conscious reflection, or flair for self-dramatization", Foer's choice to give predominant focalization to Jacob plays an

important role in the definition of *Here I Am* as a family novel. If, as we argued in the first chapter, the choice of Jacob as a first-person narrator would have limited the purposes of the novel in terms of meaningfulness, trying to give the novel a polyphonic flare (as far as focalization is concerned) would have undermined its suitability for the family novel genre, at least according to Boyers' definition.

Another definition of family novel that is worth looking at while considering *Here I am* is Yi-Ling's one; in *The Family Novel: Toward a Generic Definition*, Yi-Ling moves away from Boyers in defining the "family novel" as a novel that "broadens its perspectives to that of an entire clan" in the aim of dealing with "the plight in the group" (104). Yi-Ling counterposes the "family novel" with "the novel of individuals" which reflects instead "on a man's experience" (104). Interestingly, in both maintaining Jacob's predominance and not excluding other characters' interiorities completely, we might argue that *Here I Am* manages somehow to synthesize these two novels' sub-genres.

In outlining the characteristics of the family novel Yi-Ling stresses the centrality of conflicts, categorizing three main forms of conflicts: "conflicts of father and son, husband and wife, rise and fall of a clan" (100). In this chapter, I will tackle the family novel concentrating on the conflicts between Jacob and Julia, and try to illuminate what Yi-Ling defines as the "double purposes" of the representation of love and marriage, namely "to explore the inner world of the individual and create the multiple dimensions of a family" (112).

The theme of *paradoxical identities*, again, is of paramount importance to illuminate the development of the characters within the familiar environment, especially in the context of the dissolution of the marriage between Jacob and Julia. The identities at stake in this context are multiple and all intertwined and

the development of the story revolves around these identities and the reconfiguration characters need to come up with when they realize the inevitability of the end of this marriage.

This kind of re-negotiation works for both characters at three levels: (1) *parenthood* (being father and mother), (2) *marital relationship* (being husband and wife), and (3) *individual identity* (expressing their intimate self).

This chapter will be entirely dedicated to the analysis of how these three levels coalesce and how the characters negotiate their identities and reconfigure them once things change. As remarked by Foer himself, "the book is structured to force choices" and it is within these instabilities that the characters find themselves confronting their paradoxical identities.

In the first part of the chapter, I will concentrate on the dynamics of the dissolution of Julia and Jacob's marriage, while in the second part, I will concentrate on Julia and Jacob's interiorities to focus on the respective conflicts between established roles (that of parents and spouses) and their need for self-fulfillment. In focusing on each of the characters' trajectories I will try to delineate how such conflicts find resolution in the characters' development, arguing that if Julia's trajectory eventually finds closure, the same cannot be said for Jacob.

The results of the reflection on the relationship between Jacob and Julia works toward defining the Blochs as a "dysfunctional family", as defined by the APA Dictionary of Psychology, "a family in which relationships or communication are impaired and members are unable to attain closeness and self-expression." In looking at this definition, the one character in the novel that shows the most difficulties in self-expression is Julia and Jacob's eldest son, Sam, whose trajectory

in the novel is also the one that has the most direct relationship with the theme of paradoxical identities. It is indeed through Sam's words that Jonathan Safran Foer decides to convey his peculiar interpretation of the biblical reference that gives the title to the novel. It is in the bat mitzvah speech of Sam's Other Life avatar Samanta that Sam becomes the spokesperson for what Jonathan Safran Foer has repeatedly underlined as being the point of departure of his perspective on the novel and that was also the point of departure for the writing of this dissertation. The last part of this chapter will be devoted to the analysis of how the theme of paradoxical identities is developed as far as Sam is concerned, concentrating on how the real world and the digital world of Other Life coalesce in Sam's adolescent quest in the novel.

3.1 The Dissolution Of The Marriage: the Role of Paradoxical Identities

The instability in the relationship between the two characters emerges in the novel from the very first chapter; Julia and Jacob are summoned by rabbi Singer to his office to discuss Sam's misbehavior, and it is immediately upfront how their approach to the issue is not that of a couple who share the same point of view but that of two individuals with very different perspectives and very different views on parenthood.

In the context of the discussion with the rabbi, Julia appears to be on the rational side of the relationship; she is the one who wants to cope with what Sam has done, and after recognizing her son's handwriting does not give him the benefit of the doubt. She gives importance to finding a solution to the problem, not so much for what actually has brought Sam to do what he is accused of, but to find a way out to have Sam's bar mitzvah done.

On the other hand, Jacob comes out as on the irrational side, the one who decides to blindly defend his son and does so not by trying to understand what happened but by denying Sam's fault a priori. His attitude results in him confronting Rabbi Singer in what seems a very infantile way of conversing about the issue, and in his thinking about giving up Sam's bar mitzvah out of annoyance toward the rabbi.

From this very first appearance of Julia and Jacob as parents we understand how problematic their relationship is and how problematic their roles as parents are. They are characterized by two opposite perspectives and both have flaws. Julia is willing to do the right thing, to be the one in charge of harsh decisions

(and we will see how this is the case also for her marriage with Jacob) but she is contextually very concerned about appearances and often associates what is right with what people will consider right (in this case she is willing to confront Sam and tell him that he needs to apologize, the apology, however, is the mean for him to do his bar mitzvah, it is the quickest way out of the situation). Jacob, instead, is not able to confront reality and tries to avoid it in any way, denies the truth when it is hard to accept and finds ways to escape facts because he is not willing to face them.

These two different stances are very emblematic and provide a pattern that is in place throughout the novel and shows the reader how the relationship between the two works, the way they relate to each other, with their kids, and with what surrounds them. Especially when talking about their role as parents this kind of dichotomy is strongly stressed; Jacob is the light side of the couple, the entertainer, the "good cop" and that sometimes "can be such a pussy" (85), while, on the other hand, Julia is the heavy side of the couple, the one that handles more profound topics and conversations with her kids but also plays the role of the "bad cop" and, perfectly in opposition with Jacob's label, is deemed to be able to be a "dick" (85). If these details are important to give us a perspective on their roles as parents, we need to look deeper to understand the nature of their relationship and the cause of its downfall.

The dissolution of their marriage can be retraced to two fundamental moments that can be considered as the pillars of the end of the relationship: I will call one *the trigger event*, or that event that eventually brings them to the final decision of the divorce, the other *the traumatic event*, or that event that originated the distance between Julia and Jacob.

The trigger event coincides with Julia's finding Jacob's second phone; the phone immediately mentioned in the first chapter ("Jacob would have preferred to be […] ransacking the house for his missing phone […]" 6), is secretly kept by Jacob from Julia, and contains explicit sexual messages between Jacob and a woman who works with him. Its discovery and the consequent argument between Julia and Jacob about it can be considered as the point of no return between the couple. Even though Julia believes Jacob when he denies having had actual sexual intercourse with the woman he *digitally cheated* on her with, it is from this moment on that she starts realizing she is not happy in the relationship with him anymore and starts flirting with Mark and gives up on her marriage. *The trigger event* puts upfront the problems between Julia and Jacob especially from a sexual point of view; Julia believes that Jacob has not been able to bring the cheating to a physical level not because she trusts him as a person or because she thinks that it was a one-time mistake that he regretted but because she thinks he was not able to do it, because what the messages tell does not coincide with Jacob's sexual identity. This passage summarizes what she thinks of the episode:

> "And by the way, even if you found yourself in that situation, with an actual woman's asshole filled with your actual cum and beckoning your tongue? You know what you'd do? You'd get your ridiculous hand tremors, sweat your shirt, lose the one-quarter, Jell-O mold erection you would have been lucky to achieve in the first place, and probably shuffle off to the bathroom to check the Huffington Post for puerile, unfunny videos or relisten to the Radiolab in praise for tortoises. That's what would happen. And she'd know you were the joke that you are." (118)

It is in this exact moment of rage that Julia, at Jacob's question "You want to have an affair?", answers "I want to let things fall apart" (118), the moment that changes their relationship and brings them to the final decision (or at least Julia's final decision) of divorcing. This passage also reveals one of the main issues in Jacob's identity, namely the problem of masculinity. The *trigger event* is also important because it brings up one of those issues that are representative of Jacob's "inner self" that does not find a place in his relationship with Julia (more on this later on).

The trigger event, however, does not coincide with the moment in which Julia and Jacob's relationship starts collapsing; it has to be considered more as the straw that breaks the camel's back in their relationship. The confrontation between the two dates the couple have at the Inn in Pennsylvania for their anniversary, ten years apart, explains emblematically how the relationship between the two has developed, and how the core of the change concerns how communication changed.

The narrator repeatedly refers to the distance between the two as the "invisible bridge" (68, 71), which can be interpreted as the space of complete truth and sincerity, they both decide to avoid to prevent the other from being hurt, the "farthest point from safety" (71) that eventually leads their relationship to the very end and separates the two of them definitively. It is exactly that bridge that should allow them to be connected that instead creates the place of the unsaid which amplifies the gap between them. As for *the trigger event,* the difference between the first trip to the inn and the 10th anniversary has to do with communication, with the impossibility of sharing one's thoughts, and thus intimately, sexually close.

The first analepsis recalling the first trip to Pennsylvania has as the central scene the conversation between the two characters while they are having a very intimate sexual moment. Both communication and sexuality are upfront in the representation of the intimacy between the two characters:

> She and Jacob shared a joint – the first time either had smoked since college – and lay in bed naked, and promised to share everything, everything without exception, regardless of the shame or discomfort or potential for hurt. It felt like the most ambitious promise two people could make to each other. (38)

This conversation anticipates a scene in which the two alternate a conversation about not withholding anything from the other with sexual interaction.

The recounting of the second trip to the same inn, which aimed to perfectly recreate the first one, goes in the direction of stressing how that closeness, that intimacy, changed in ten years. The changes concerning the two pillars of their relationship, telling the truth and sexual intimacy, are immediately put up front before setting out for the second trip:

> Julia became pregnant with Sam a year later. Then Max. Then Benjy. Her body changed, but Jacob's desire didn't. It was their volume of withholding that changed. They continued to have sex, although what had always arisen spontaneously came to require either an impetus (drunkenness, watching *Blue Is The Warmest Color* on Jacob's laptop in bed, Valentine's Day) or muscling through the self-consciousness and fear of embarrassment, which usually led to big orgasms and no kissing. They still occasionally said things that, the moment after coming, felt humiliating to the point of needing to physically remove oneself to get an unwanted glass of water. Each still

> masturbated to thoughts of the other, even if those fantasies bore no blood relationship to lived life and often included another other. But even the memory of that night in Pennsylvania had to be withheld, because it was a horizontal line on a doorframe: *Look at how much we've changed*. (44)

The passage stresses how the sexual relationship between the two has lost its spontaneity, and how the intimate communication that characterizes the couple's first date in Pennsylvania, has mutated into something to be ashamed of, "to the point of needing to physically remove oneself to get an unwanted glass of water."

In the continuation of this passage the clash between their respective roles in the relationship (that of husband and wife) and their identity as individuals is mentioned in its paradoxicality: their roles are presented as inversely proportional:

> They loved each other's company and would always choose it over either aloneness or the company of anyone else, but the more comfort they found together, the more life they shared, the more estranged they became from their inner lives. (44-45)

This sentence represents quintessentially how the concept of paradoxical identities plays a fundamental role in the unfolding of Julia and Jacob's characters, how their being together, their being husband and wife has taken the place of their being Julia and Jacob, of their being two distinct individuals. And again, the theme of communication and sexuality, or in this case *talking* and *touching* stand for the sacrifice the familiar life requested to them, in this case not only as husband and wife but, especially, as father and mother.

> Julia could clip newborn fingernails with her teeth, and breast-feed while making a lasagna, and remove splinters without tweezers or pain, and have the kids begging for the lice comb, and compel sleep with a third-eye massage – but she had forgotten *how to touch her husband*. Jacob taught the kids the difference between *farther* and *further*, but no longer knew *how to talk to his wife*. (46) (emphasis mine)

If we look at the last two passages I quoted we can see how the three levels, the three paradoxical identities concerning the two characters I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, are all intertwined and coalescing; their being husband and wife, their closeness, made them respectively estranged from their inner lives, while their being mother and father, what brought them to be able to develop very pragmatic skills for their children, brought them far from each other as a married couple (the choice of words stresses indeed how Julia "had forgotten how to touch *her husband*" and Jacob "no longer knew how to talk to *his wife*", the notions of husband and wife are central).

The distance created between Jacob and Julia concerning expressing oneself (both as individuals and to the other) and having physical intimacy is again addressed as the core issue between the couple; the central notion is that of *desire* with Jacob's incapability of verbally addressing his desires, and Julia's incapability of physically expressing urgency (talking and touching are, again, the core of their estrangement):

> Their inner lives were nurtured in private – Julia designed houses for herself; Jacob worked on his bible, and bought a second phone – and a destructive cycle developed between them: with Julia's inability to express urgency, Jacob became even less sure that he was wanted, and more afraid

> of risking foolishness, which furthered the distance between Julia's hand and Jacob's body, which Jacob had no language to address. Desire became a threat – an enemy – to their domesticity. (46)

This passage proves the creation of a paradox between domestic and private: what each of the characters develops privately, namely their "inner lives", takes them further apart from domesticity. The concept of home and the concept of private, which are usually strongly related, become here a counterintuitive binary opposition. (we will see in detail how these work for each character in the next section of the chapter).

As briefly anticipated in one of the passages quoted above, the importance of distance and its oxymoronic value in the relationship is crucial to understand the development of their inner lives far from each other. Their being too close to each other is mentioned as not giving them the space to express themselves openly, "The vastness of their shared life made sharing their singularity impossible. They needed distance that wasn't withdrawal, but beckoning" (48). This absence of distance creates, thus, a different kind of distance, which is the consequence of their inability to express their singularity to the other, and becomes the elephant in the room of their relationship ("But the distance that didn't exist was too great" 49).

The recounting of the return to the inn in Pennsylvania goes exactly in this direction; it stresses the withholding and how this impacts the whole trip and especially the intimacy that is expected from this trip (in the recreation of the trip the recreation of the sexual intimacy is clearly implied). The narration, in this sense, goes from the conversation about "not withholding" while interacting sexually in the first trip, to Jacob's sexual anxiety and a whole conversation of "if

they would have said what they were thinking" that eventually ends with nothing said:

> But he didn't say anything, and neither did she. Not because the words were deliberately withheld, but because the pipeline between them was too occluded for such bravery. (72)

The concept of the pipeline is explained in the same chapter, in an episode that referred to Max, as something everyone has "through which he pushes what he is willing and be able to share of himself out into the world, and through which he takes in all the world that he is willing and be able to bear" (46-47). In this case, however, the pipeline is not that conduct that connects Julia and Jacob with the world but, as made clear in the passage, the conduct that connects Julia with Jacob and vice versa, their willingness and ability to share their inner world with the other.

As anticipated earlier, the process that brought Julia and Jacob's marriage to its unavoidable end has its culmination in what I called *the trigger event*, and, in defining it as a process, it is important to underline how it is not something that happened overnight. In reflecting on their relationship, however, it is worth looking for an origin, a moment that we can consider as the beginning of the end; I decided to call this moment *the traumatic event*.

In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* Cathy Caruth defines the nature of traumas and clarifies how "the traumatic event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is to be possessed by an image or an event"(4-5). In the quiet and comfortable life of the Blochs we can identify one event that corresponds to

this definition: Sam's incident. Throughout the novel we are repeatedly told about this event, namely the smashing of Sam's left-hand fingers on the hinge of a door, and how it had irreversible consequences both on Sam and his difficult relationship with his body, and also on the relationship between Jacob and Julia. This episode unleashes a series of negotiations concerning Jacob and Julia as a couple and as parents.

The episode is briefly mentioned in the first chapter of the novel, "Get Back to Happiness": such an early appearance immediately problematizes Julia and Jacob's involvement in the incident. The narrator tells us about a Shabbat the family spent at Isaac's and about a dilemma Jacob poses to their kids to make them reflect on the role of "actions and intentions in situations, in addition to outcomes" (14):

> 'A person gets drunk at a party, and hits and kills a kid on the way home. Another person gets equally drunk, and makes it home safely. Why does the first one goes to jail for the rest of his life, while the second gets to wake up the next morning as if nothing happened?' (13)

The narrator then proceeds on presenting Max and Sam's reasoning on the matter and how they concluded that "His parents should have kept him safe. They should be sent to jail" (14). The impact of such reasoning, we are told, had been huge in Max and Sam's life since then and it is in the explanation of how it influenced the kid's behavior that Sam's incident comes out:

> When the fingers of Sam's left hand were crushed in the hinge of the heavy iron door and he screamed, "Why did that happen?" over and over and over, "Why did that happen?" and Julia, holding him against her, blood blooming

> across her shirt as breast milk used to when she heard a baby cry, said simply, "I love you, and I'm here," and Jacob said, "We need to go to the emergency room," Sam, who feared doctors more than anything any doctor ever threat, pleaded, "We don't! We don't! I did this on purpose! I did this on purpose!" (14-15)

The most obvious interpretation of the decision to mention Sam's incident here is to stress how "Sam and Max became enthralled by intention" (14) as in the culmination of the climax of episodes in which either of the two brothers mentioned doing things "on purpose" or "not on purpose" as justifications of their actions. On the other hand, we cannot ignore the proximity between the emblematic tale of the incident of the kid and the real tale of Sam's incident; the second does not end with the indications of anybody's fault but the first one resounds with the sentence "His parents should have kept him safe." The presence of the former episode inevitably problematizes the role of the latter in Julia and Jacob's identities as parents.

The injury is then mentioned on other occasions, especially in passages filtered through Sam's perspective that illuminated the physical consequences it had on his left hand. But it is in chapter "Epitome" that the episode is associated with the beginning of the end of the relationship between Jacob and Julia, in this case from Julia's perspective:

> So much sublimation: domestic closeness had become intimate distance, intimate distance had become shame, shame had become resignation, resignation had become fear, fear had become resentment, resentment had become self-protection. Julia often thought that if they could just trace the string back the source of their withholding, they might actually find that

> openness. Was it Sam's injury? That never-asked question of how it happened? She'd always assumed they were protecting each other with that silence, but what if they were trying to injure, to transfer the wound from Sam to themselves? (91)

In thinking about the process that brought to the dissolution of her relationship with Jacob, Julia tries to find an origin; in this she sees the way to the "openness" she and Jacob lost. Sam's injury is immediately viewed as "the source of their withholding", even if not with certainty (the paragraph goes on with the narrator expanding, always from Julia's perspective, about other events that could have been good candidates as sources of withholding; Sam's injury remains, however, the only very specific event among all the others), and the core of the event is, once again, fault. The miscommunication about the event between the spouses, the silence upon how it happened, has two paradoxical purposes: on the one hand to protect each other, to avoid the spelling out of specific responsibility, and on the other hand, to silently imply their personal fault, and imply the fault of the other. It is this second explanation that, once again, problematizes the event, in implying the possibility of admitting to each other their inability to keep Sam safe.

It is in part II of the novel "Learning Impermanence", specifically in chapter "Artificial Emergency", that Sam's injury is explicitly associated with trauma for the first time. Mark and Julia, who are leading the group that participates in the ONU simulation at the Washington Hilton, decide to have a glass of wine and a little chat before the actual event. While they are talking about Julia's discovery of Jacob's phone, Billie, Sam's crush, interrupts with the announcement that the country they represent in the simulation, The Federate States of Micronesia, has

an atomic bomb. After this piece of information Mark and Julia proceed on gathering all the components of the group to discuss the matter and at this moment, Julia seems to have a sort of emotional breakdown, apparently for no reason.

> Maybe the artificial emergency released trapped feelings about the real emergency. There was a trauma center in her brain – she had no Dr. Silvers to explain that to her, but she had the Internet. The most unexpected situations would set it off, and then all thoughts and perception rushed toward it. At the center was Sam's injury. And at the center of that – the vortex into which all thoughts and perceptions were pulled – was the moment when Jacob carried him into the house, saying "Something happened," and she saw more blood than there was but couldn't hear Sam's screaming, and for a moment, no longer than a moment, she lost control. For a moment she was untethered from rationality, from reality, from herself. The soul departs the body at the moment of death, but there is a yet more complete abandoning: everything departed her body at the moment she saw her child's flowing blood. (212)

Before the earthquake in Israel, before Isaac's death, the "real emergency" mentioned here cannot but be the end of the marriage between Julia and Jacob. The association between the end of the marriage and Sam's injury is then again brought back when the narrator enters Julia's interiority. It is deemed as the "trauma center in her brain" and a very vivid and sharp image related to the moment after the incident is described as "the vortex into which all thoughts and perceptions were pulled", formerly the cause of Julia's loss of control. The overwhelming experience is so intense that is associated with and compared to death; the abandoning of the body Julia experienced after seeing Sam's blood

flowing is described as more complete than the abandoning one experiences in the moment of death. While the image of the soul abandoning the body in the moment of death is a very common one it is not made clear in this passage what is implied in that "everything" departing Julia's body, but functions in expressing the fullness of her experience.

The depiction of this very clear image ("to be possessed by an image or an event"), the description of the full abandoning of the body and the unexpected and recursive return of such image ("not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it"(Caruth, 4-5)), are the components that contain Julia's trauma, in keeping with Caruth's definition.

The passage ends with the momentary disappearance of the trauma which is personified and represented as the active side of a relationship whose passive side is Julia, who suffers its actions:

> And then, as quickly as it had seized control, Julia's trauma center relented. *Maybe it was tired. Maybe it was merciful.* Maybe she looked away and looked back, and remembered that she was in the world. But how had the last thirty minutes passed? Had she taken the elevator or the stairs? Had she knocked on the door of Mark's room or was it open?
>
> The debate was under way and roiling. Did anyone notice her absence? Her presence? (212-213) (emphasis mine)

Julia's return "in the world" from her traumatic memory shows traits of amnesia, a complete absence from reality, and oblivion of her actions.

It is eventually in part V of the novel, in chapter "Look! A Crying Hebrew Baby", that the correlation between Julia's traumatic center and the beginning of the end of the marriage is explained.

> Sam's injury. It was the place she was unwilling to go, because there was no road back. And yet the trauma center of her brain was always pushing her there. And she was always never fully returning. She'd found peace with why it happened – there was no why – but not how. It was too painful, because whatever the sequence of events, it wasn't necessary or inevitable. Jacob never asked her if she had been the one to open the door. (It was too far heavy for Sam to have opened himself.) Julia never asked Jacob if he had closed it on Sam's fingers. (*Maybe* Sam could have gotten it moving, and inertia would have taken care of the rest?) It was five years ago, and the journey – the century-long morning in the ER, the twice-a-week visits to the plastic surgeon, the year of rehab – brought them closer than they'd ever been. But it also created a black hole of silence, from which everything had to keep a safe distance, into which so much was swallowed, a teaspoon of which weighed more than a million suns consuming a million photos of a million families on a million moons. (455-456)

As anticipated in the very first passage mentioning Sam's injury, the core of Julia's trauma is Julia and Jacob's inability to keep Sam safe or, as phrased here, the awareness of the fact that the event "wasn't necessary or inevitable". As in the whole process of the dissolution of their marriage, here the paradoxical relationship between closeness and distance returns; the more the two become close, because of the consequences of Sam's incident, the more the emotional distance caused by the silence upon how it happened increases.

This conceptual juxtaposition qualifies the event as the very beginning of the end of their marriage, it reflects how what happened in this specific case is concentrically extended to their entire relationship later on: the unsaid generated by this event is the foundation for all the unsaid that populates their marriage throughout the years.

Eventually, the event finds closure, many years after Jacob and Julia's divorce, and we are told so by Jacob in his bible; in the instruction entitled "How to play the intersection of love, anger, and fear of death" Jacob tells about how in his annual teeth cleaning the dentist discovered a lump in Jacob's throat and referred him to an oncologist to have it double-checked. After this news, we are told about Jacob's choice to call Julia and we are told the dialogue between the two, which is "virtually identical to what actually transpired" (599) (we have always to keep in mind that the purpose of Jacob's bible is that of giving instructions for the script of his TV show). The conversation begins with Jacob telling Julia about the lump but continues with the two confronting each other on their past relationship and the mistakes they made with each other until Jacob suddenly says:

> JACOB
> You opened the door, unknowingly. I closed it, unknowingly.
> JULIA
> What door?
> JACOB
> Sam's hand.
> *Julia starts to cry, quietly*. (610-611)

The resolution of the untold is here represented in a very dry, essential conversation that has no detailed explanations; it is the distance they had not that

did not allow them to enter this very concise conversation, that did not allow them to admit their fault but also admit their blamelessness. And they needed the time and space of a "reincarnation", as Julia would call her second marriage, to be able to find closure. Once again, the paradoxicality between closeness and distance plays a fundamental role in Julia and Jacob's relationship.

The importance of physical distance stressed in the relationship between Jacob and Julia has its counter-check, at the very end of the novel, when Tamir and Rivka's relationship is mentioned; in the last part of the novel, "Home", we are told about the end of the war in Israel and the consequences on Tamir's family, namely the wounding of Tamir's son Noam.

> Tamir's first instinct was to cling to Rivka. If someone had told him, a month or year or decade earlier, that Noam would be wounded in a war, he would have predicted the end of his marriage. And yet when the unimaginable happened, it was just the opposite of what he'd imagined. (656)

There is a son, there is an injury, and there is a marriage and the prediction of an end but there is also, somehow, a way out, and it has everything to do with distance.

> When the house shook with the middle-of-the-night knocking against the door, Tamir was at a forward operating base near Dimona; his commander woke him with the news. Later, he and Rivka would try to pinpoint the exact moment that each learned of what happened, as if something profound depended on who knew first, and what the amount of time was that one parent knew and the other still believed Noam to be OK. For those five or thirty minutes, there would have existed a greater distance between them than the one that separated them before they met. Perhaps if Tamir had been

> home, the shared experience would have driven them apart, into competitive suffering, misplaced fury, blame. But the apartness drew them together. (656)

The distance between Rivka and Tamir, as opposed to the closeness between Julia and Jacob, is here exactly the reason why not only they managed to save their marriage, but also managed to make it like "the beginning of love" (657).

3.2 Interiorities And Need For Self-Fulfillment In Jacob And Julia's Lives

It is exactly in the gaps created by the distance between Julia and Jacob that the two characters create a private life exclusively for themselves in search of a self-fulfillment they failed to achieve in the familiar context.

It is from the very first episode of the meeting with rabbi Singer that traces of these inner lives first appear in the novel; the uncomfortable role of parents in the context of Sam's misbehavior creates the space for Julia and Jacob to project themselves somewhere else they would rather be, and none of these spaces includes the other or their children:

> They didn't want to be there. No one wanted to be there. […] Jacob would have preferred to be working on the bible for Ever-Dying People, or ransacking the house for his missing phone, or at least tapping the Internet's level for some dopamine hits. And today was supposed to be Julia's day off – this was the opposite of off. (6)

Some of the elements to retrace their respective inner lives can be found in this passage; the bible and the phone, which have already been mentioned, are perfected with his need for "dopamine hits", while, more subtly, Julia's day off is only a hint that tells us little about her in the early stages of the novel but that will take shape later.

It is in chapter "A Hand The Size Of Yours, A House The Size Of This One" that Julia's interiority and the meaning of that "day off" start to have specific contours. In the alternation of Julia's focalization and explicit sexual messages (that will later turn out to be the messages in Jacob's second phone), in what in

the cinematographic lexicon would be called cross-cutting, Julia's most intimate need is explained, namely that of designing houses for herself.

> She had never wanted to become an architect, but she always wanted to make a home for herself. She disposed of the dolls to free the boxes they came in. She spent a summer furnishing the space under her bed. Her clothes covered every surface in her room, because clothes shouldn't be wasted with utility. It wasn't until she started designing homes for herself – all on paper, each a source of pride and shame – that she came to understand what was meant by "herself" (36)

Not only Julia's need is said to define her both as an architect (which she can be but does not want to become) and as a woman (the paragraph starts with "Every architect has fantasies of building her own home, and so does every woman" (35)), but it is also immediately problematized, as the result of such designing is not only beneficial for Julia but results in both "pride and shame." The shame derives both from the inability to share them with Jacob and feel satisfied by his comments and, especially, from the awareness that her designed houses are for one person only. The exclusion of the children in her projections brings out the nature of Julia's dichotomous thoughts: on the one hand, she defines her ultimate identity to be that of being a mother, on the other hand, the way she finds to "understand what was meant by 'herself'" excludes her husband and sons, projecting a space exclusively for her. The need for space Julia feels, which also explains the need for a day off during the week, clashes with her maternal identity:

> She never knew what to do with the feeling of wanting more for herself: time, space, quiet. Maybe girls would have been different, but she had boys. For a year she held them against her, but after that sleepless holiday she was at the mercy of their physicality: their screaming, wrestling, table drumming, competitive farting, and endless explorations of their scrotums. She loved it, all of it, but needed time, space, and quiet. Maybe if she'd girls, maybe they'd been more contemplative, less brutish, more constructive, less animalistic. Even approaching such thoughts made her feel unmotherly, although she always knew she was a good mother. (52-53)

It is eventually from the conversation with Mark, in the same chapter, that Julia's reflection about happiness is brought back not only, as in this last passage, as a need for "quiet", but as a conduit for her happiness. The encounter between the two starts with Mark's news about his divorce from Jennifer, and the conversation continues with Mark explaining to Julia the reasons for the divorce and the positive impact it had on his life in the recovery of his "interior monologue". Throughout the conversation Julia is described as uncomfortable in confronting Mark's argument; first, she tries to avoid eye contact with him ("Julia looked for the anorexic clerk. Anything to look away from Mark" 57) then her struggle to find physical ease is described as an antidote, or at least a distraction, to her emotional discomfort ("She pressed into the display case, angled herself a few degrees. No amount of adjusting could make this conversation comfortable, but it would at least deflect the blow" 57). Despite her attempt to avoid it, the conversation eventually shifts from Mark's life to hers:

> "You're assuming happiness is the ultimate ambition."
> "I'm not. I'm just asking if you would be happier alone."

> Of course it wasn't the first time she confronted the question, but it was the first time it had been posed by someone else. It was the first time she didn't have the ability to evade it. Would she be happier alone? *I am a mother*, she thought – not an answer to the question being asked, and no more her ultimate ambition than happiness, but her ultimate identity. She had no lives to compare with her life, no parallel aloneness to measure against her aloneness. She was simply doing what she thought was the right thing to do. Living what she thought was the right life.
>
> "No," she said. "I would not be happier alone." (59-60)

In this passage, which I have already quoted in the first chapter, Julia is exposed to Mark's question, and, between the question and Julia's answer, we enter her interiority that makes her existential dilemma clear; Julia's reasoning splits between the idea of being happy, which she deems impossible to answer because of lack of information, and the idea of doing the right thing that eventually prevails (this is something that characterizes Julia as a character as we can see also in her reasoning as far as Sam's misbehavior is concerned). It is in the struggle between her idea of motherhood in choosing the right thing to do (this will be also the most difficult obstacle she would have to face concerning the end of her marriage with Jacob, namely the idea that divorcing was not the right thing to do for her children) and her need for happiness that Julia' character is developed throughout the novel.

In the end, however, Julia's quest for happiness (unlike Jacob's) seems to find a resolution; she manages to let things go between her and Jacob for the sake of her happiness despite her doubts. This eventually turns out to be a breakthrough for her life, her motherhood does not seem affected by it, while her need for

aloneness seems to disappear in the version of "[her]self plus time" (633) that allows her to feel "reincarnated" and to decide to remarry (a decision that, however, at the same time questions the idea of an actual resolution in Julia's quest).

On the other hand, things work differently when we enter Jacob's interiority. As we have seen in the first chapter of this dissertation, Jacob's prevalence in the novel is undeniable and this contributes to the character's complexity; the inner lives Jacob needs are multiple and each of them represents a different facet of Jacob's struggle for truthfulness and self-expression.

The first aspect, which is also the most obvious and explicitly mentioned in the novel, is the need for a second phone. As I presented earlier, the second phone bespeaks Jacob's struggle with sexuality and masculinity; repeatedly throughout the novel we are told about Jacob's struggle with erectile dysfunction in his sexual relationship with Julia (that only later in the novel will turn out to be a side effect of the Propecia pills Jacob takes to prevent hair loss), something that influences Jacob in his interaction with his wife (the expectancy of an erection is central in the description of the second trip of the couple at the inn in Pennsylvania). His sexual insecurity, however, is not only related to this disorder but can be traced earlier in Jacob's attitude toward Julia as we are told that "He was not an insecure person in other contexts, but his brain was compelled, with the magnetism of someone unable to escape the perpetual reliving of a trauma, to imagine her being sexually intimate with others" (38-39) which is also referred to as "his greatest vulnerability" (38). Similarly to how Other Life functions for Sam (we will see it in detail in chapter 4), Jacob needs his second phone to exchange explicit sexual messages with one of his colleagues to cope with the

lack of sexuality and masculinity he experiences in real life. It is exactly in this estrangement from reality that he finds a way to express himself, to feel free, as we are told in chapter "De Zelbe Prayz" in part V of the novel:

> Julia was right: it wasn't a moment of weakness. He pushed the exchange into sexuality, he bought the second phone, he was forming the words whenever he wasn't typing them, stealing off to read hers as soon as they came through. He'd more than once put Benji in front of a movie so he could jerk off to a new message. Why?
>
> Because it was perfect. He was a father to the boys, a son to his father, a husband to his wife, a friend to his friends, but to whom was he himself? The digital veil offered a self-disappearing that made self-expression, finally, possible. When he was no one, he was free to be himself. (515)

If we isolate the last sentence of this passage and take it out of context we might actually wonder whether it should be attributed to Jacob or Sam; the idea of a "digital veil" that enables "a self-disappearing that made self-expression […] possible" might be a very effective summary of Sam's addiction to Other Life, but here it concerns Jacob. The fragmentation of Jacob's identity in multiple paradoxical identities is upfront in this passage, in which the concept of being "himself" seems to imply the need for a different space, a space that none of the relationships in his life allow him to have (very similarly to how Julia "came to know what was meant by 'herself'" (36) when she started to design her houses). The fact that Jacob renounces having an actual physical encounter with the woman is the counterproof that his being sexually stifled was not the ultimate reason for the possession of the phone: the "digital veil" is, however, fundamental.

Jacob's inner life, however, is not limited to the self-expression that he feels to be empowered by the phone; two more aspects of his character can be attributed to the need for a space for his inner self he cannot find anywhere else: the writing of *Ever-Dying People* and its bible and his secret knowledge of American Sign Language.

The importance of *Ever-Dying People* is shown by how pervasive its presence is throughout the novel, and I have already argued in chapter 1 how functional the presence of the bible is as far as our understanding of the narrative voice is concerned. *What role does it play in Jacob's life?* The question is answered in the first chapter of part III of the novel, "Holding A Pen, Punching, Self-Love" and, again, a parallel with Sam's Other Life can be detected:

> The show began with the beginning of the writing of the show. The characters in the show were the characters in the real Jacob's life: an unhappy wife (who didn't want to be described that way); three sons: one on the brink of manhood, one on the brink of extreme self-consciousness, one on the brink of mental independence; a terrified, xenophobic father; a quietly weaving and unweaving mother; a depressed grandfather. Should he one day share it and be asked how autobiographical it was, he would say, "It's not my life, but it's me." And if someone – who else but Dr. Silvers? – were to ask how autobiographical his life was, he would say, "It's my life, but it's not me."
> The writing kept pace with the changing events in Jacob's life. Or his life kept pace with the writing. Sometimes it was hard to tell. (243-244)

This passage shows how the realm of reality and the realm of authenticity which should logically line up are instead controversially paradoxical. Jacob's authenticity belongs to the fictional world of his script, which is only partially

autobiographical, while his real life feels to Jacob as inauthentic, at least as far as being himself is concerned. This concept is emblematically summarized in the following passage when we are told that "the authenticity of his work was the only antidote to the inauthenticity of his life" (244). Jacob's need for truthfulness, something he cannot find in his real life, is the function his secret script has for him.

As anticipated, this is something that finds a lot of common ground with the relationship Sam has with Other Life; both cannot express in their real lives what they feel their real selves are and need to fall back on a fictional world to cope with what they experience as a lack (this is not very distant from Julia's need for designing houses either).

The last, and perhaps the most enigmatic, inner life Jacob lives secretly is related to his knowledge of American Sign Language; this detail of Jacob's life is only mentioned twice throughout the novel and little or no explanation for the reason for such interest (and especially for the choice of not sharing it with anyone) is explained in those passages. The first time in which we are told about it is very late in the novel, in chapter "De Zelbe Prayz" in part V; the detail is mentioned interrupting the night phone call between Julia and Jacob in which Jacob tells her that he decided to go to Israel:

> Jacob had regained the hearing he'd pretended to lose as a child[9], and acquired a kind of pet interest in deafness that stayed with him into adulthood. He never shared it with Julia or anyone, as it felt distasteful,

[9] Here the narrator refers to another episode mentioned earlier in the novel where Deborah (Jacob's mother), during her toast for Julia and Jacob's wedding, tells a story remembering how in his childhood Jacob used to pretend to have illnesses.

> wrong. No one, not even Dr. Silvers, knew he was able to sign, or that he would attend annual conventions for the D.C. chapter of the National Association of the Deaf. He didn't pretend he was deaf when he went. He pretended he was a teacher at an elementary school for deaf children. He explained his interest by saying he was the child of a deaf father. (513)

Jacob's refusal to share his knowledge of sign language is related to his idea of it as "distasteful, wrong"; even his participation in the annual conventions needs a mask, the mere interest in the subject is not enough for Jacob to justify his presence. Once again, Jacob resorts to an alternative self, the fake identity of an elementary teacher for deaf children that, however, needs a further reason for interest, that of the deaf father (Jacob does not conceive even the idea of doing it just for the sake of helping people, he needs to create a fake identity that has deeper reasons).

It is in the creation of this new self that we can go back to the concept of "self-disappearing that made self-expression, finally, possible" (515) that we have seen in the case of the second phone; Jacob's unhappiness makes him need to free himself from his life, be something else but Jacob to feel himself. This perception is part and parcel of Jacob's reasoning about identity: the phone gives him the digital space to create a sexual identity that has nothing to do with the reality of his sexual identity, the script of Ever-Dying people gives him the space to create a character who happens to be called Jacob and shares his autobiographical features but differs from his life ("It's not my life, but it's me" (244)), and finally the knowledge of American Sign Language gives him the space to create a new identity, to be, even only for a couple of hours, something different from Jacob the writer, a new, reinvented and arbitrary version of himself.

How can we justify this need to escape his life? Jacob is essentially an unhappy character, who perceives his life as boring but that, at the same time, lives in denial. Furthermore, his way of looking at reality (that perhaps is also the reason why he is a writer) in craving for "dopamine hits" and dramatic events, influences even more his perspective about himself. This aspect contributes to the creation of a controversial relationship between thoughts and behaviors in Jacob's life; the way he would like to live is everything but how he lives, the need for validation from others, the indecisiveness and non-action that quintessentially define his conduct contrast with his unrealistic need for action and significative events. This is part and parcel of the difficult relationship he has with Tamir for example; what Tamir has, according to Jacob, is a life full of drama, a life in which he managed to "escape the Great Flatness" (474) and this is something that Jacob envies. Jacob, on the other hand, needs to face problems that appear smaller if compared to Tamir's but his trying to deny unhappiness and his chronic indecisiveness leave him stuck in a life he does not want to live and does not feel as his own, creating a vicious circle of unhappiness; the only antidotes Jacob finds to escape are the creation of those alternative identities.

If Julia's trajectory as a character suggests closure, a sort of happy ending, a path toward self-discovery, Jacob's trajectory seems more unstable and his character (paradoxically if we think at how generally the character who is most complex is the one we expect to grow and change the most) ends up falling back to the same features encountered throughout the novel. Once we consider the choice of going to Israel, Julia's wedding scene, and the phone call between Jacob and Julia when the former tells the latter about having found out about a lump in his throat, Jacob's behavior seems to be motivated by an attention-seeking

factor more than real care for others. Toward the very end of the novel, when we are told about an e-mail conversation between Jacob and Tamir, three days after Tamir's return to Israel, the very evidence of Jacob's non-development is exemplified:

> Three days after returning to Israel, Tamir e-mailed Jacob from an outpost in Negev, where his tank unit was awaiting its next order: "Today I fired a gun, and my son fired a gun. I never doubted the rightness of my firing a weapon to defend my home, or of Noam doing so. But the fact of us both doing it on the same day cannot be right. Can you understand that?"
> "You drive the tank?" Jacob asked.
> "Did you read what I wrote?"
> "I'm sorry. I don't know what to say." (655)

At Tamir's request for empathy for the dramatic condition his family is in, Jacob is not only incapable of answering but also returns to that thrill for drama I mentioned earlier, and that brings him to inappropriately ask Tamir "You drive the tank?", confirming his inability to feel for others.

Paradoxically, what Foer's deemed to be "a book structured to force choices" ends up having his "hero" (that happens to be also the author's alter ego) to be the only one who suffers others' choices rather than being the one in charge of making them, and that, eventually, is unable to grow.

3.3 Sam's Paradoxical Identities – Becoming a Man between Other Life and Bar Mitzvah

Sam's paradoxical identities in *Here I Am* are developed through an actual double identity, something less subtle than the paradoxical identities that concern the other characters (even if, as I pointed out in the previous chapter, many are the similarities between the characters' identities). The identities at stake have to do with two different realities, the realm of "everyday" reality and the realm of the virtual; Sam, indeed, lives a profound sense of inadequacy toward his condition of adolescent and, to cope with his discomfort, develops a second digital life in the multi-user virtual environment (MUVE) of Other Life.

While these two realms might seem very distinct and also hierarchically distinguished in terms of importance, the former being associated with authentic reality and the latter with artificial fantasy, I will highlight how, throughout the novel, they are blended and how, for Sam, the parallel reality of Other Life often stands on the side of authenticity much more than real life does.

What is upfront, again, is a need for truthfulness, for a perceived full expression of the self that domesticity cannot guarantee and that asks for a different space to be conveyed.

Sam is presented in the very first chapter, "Get back to happiness", through something he is accused of having done, something that immediately, as we have seen in the previous chapters, problematizes his character and puts him in trouble, that is, having written random offensive words in a paper that is found on his desk at the Hebrew school (and undeniably written by him as Julia recognizes his handwriting). We are immediately told how the consequence of

this finding might affect Sam's doing his bar mitzvah (all the themes of the novel develop immediately from this first instability). Sam appears for the first time in the book before the presentation of this instability.

Sam's first appearance pictures him seated outside rabbi Singer's office and, even in light of what we will be told is happening in the rabbi's office: he is described, like a helpless convicted waiting for his execution, "head lowered, eyes on the upturned hands in his lap like a monk waiting to burn" (6).

In the exchange he then has with the boys of Adas Israel we have the first important details concerning Sam's personality that confirm his passivity and introversion and we also find the first hint concerning his paradoxical identities:

> "We heard what you wrote," one said, thrusting a finger into Sam's chest.
> "You crossed the line."
> "Some fucked-up shit, bro."
> It was odd, because Sam's profligate sweat production usually didn't kick in until the threat had subsided.
> "I didn't write it, and I'm not your"- air quotes – "bro."
> He could have said that, but he didn't. He also could have explained why nothing was as it seemed. But he didn't. Instead, he just took it, as he always did in life on the crap side of the screen. (6)

From this brief passage, we can already grasp some important elements that will help us shed light on Sam's character: first of all, we are informed by the accusations of the boys that he has written something inappropriate, that he "crossed the line", and this is immediately problematic as the same boys that are accusing Sam are having a very explicit sexual conversation. Secondly, the situation Sam is facing is described as a "threat" for him; we do not know if, in

this case, the term refers to the situation as a whole or specifically to the conversation he is having with his peers, but this hints at the fact that Sam and the other boys of Adas Israel are not friends: Sam does not find comfort from them but, on the contrary, he has to defend himself from this confrontation.

Then, Sam's behavior is described, with Sam himself as the focalizer, detailing what he "could have [done]" but did not do; we are told that "nothing was as it seemed" and we are alerted to the fact that the episode we are about to be told has an explanation, but Sam's passivity prevails and the scene ends with nothing actually done. The definition of everyday life as "life on the crap side of the screen" is the first hint that we have of Sam's double life, as the second chapter of the novel will explain. The presence of a "non-crap side of the screen", in which Sam is able to actually speak his truth and not just passively put up with others, is suggested in this passage.

Indeed, the chapter in which we get to know Sam's character more introspectively is the second chapter, the first one entitled "Here I Amn't" (many of the titles of chapters related to Sam reoccur in the novel); here we are not only immediately introduced to the duality that coexists in Sam's life ("While Sam waited on the bench outside Rabbi Singer's office, Samanta approached the bimah" 17) but we also understand the gap in Sam's existence in which this parallel life has found its place. The chapter develops in what resembles a crosscutting scene (a technique repeatedly used by Foer in the novel), with the description of Sam's Other Life interrupted by the conversation he is forced to have with his mother Julia, who asks him to apologize for what the words written at the Hebrew school.

Sam's problematic condition is introduced by mentioning his spending an "enormous amount of time" (17) watching videos with various violent contents. This obsession is explained to be masochistic ("sharp objects he used against himself", 18), a masochism that Sam needs to free his repressions, because "there is so much of him that he needed to move to the outside, but the process required wounds" (18). It is exactly these "unreleased insides" (18) that seem to lead Sam to rely on an avatar that fills the gap of his existence, the lacks that his life as an unsatisfied teenager cannot cope with.

In the creation of his *doppelgänger* in Other Life, Samanta, Sam seems, on the one hand, to seek to distance from himself as much as possible by deciding his avatar to share neither country of origin (Samanta is Latina) nor gender with his actual self;[10] on the other hand, he seems to not being able to detach it completely from his cultural heritage and specifically from what he is going through in that precise moment of his life, that is the preparation of his bar mitzvah. While "living" Other life (as he instructed his parents to say when talking about his activity inside the virtual world, refusing the playful lexicon typically associated with videogames) takes the time in which "he was supposed to be memorizing the Hebrew words and Jewish melody of a haftorah whose meaning no one ever bothered with" (18), he still decides to build a synagogue inside Other Life in which Samanta can have her bat mitzvah. The Jewish coming-of-age Sam sabotages in his real life is controversially recreated in his Other life.

[10] A 2011 study made by Robert Andrew Dunn and Rosanna E. Guadagno hypothesized a correlation between the personality of individuals engaging in the digital world and their avatars; the study assumed that introvert individuals would be more likely to create their avatar with more discrepancies from themselves than extroverts (100).

Sam and Samanta's first appearances are themselves antithetical: as mentioned before, Sam's first depiction can be related to passivity, to introversion, whereas Samanta's is mentioned while approaching the bimah, the "raised platform in a synagogue from which the Torah is read" ("Bimah"); while Sam lowers his head, Samanta ascends, while Sam does not speak his mind with the boys of Adas Israel, Samanta positions herself in the sacred place designated for making speeches.

It is in the second chapter intitled "Here I Amn't" (fifth chapter of section one) that we start to go deeper into the sense of inadequacy Sam struggles with; at the basis of Sam's need for Other Life there is an extreme self-consciousness related to his body, what would be technically called body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) that indicates people who "have a preoccupation with a perceived defect or defects or ugliness in their appearance" (Veale and Bewley, 1):

> No one ever asked Sam why he took a Latina as an avatar, because no one, other than Max, knew that he had. The choice might have seemed odd. Someone might have thought it was offensive. They would be wrong. Being Sam was odd and offensive. Having such prolific salivary and sweat glands. Being unable not to think about walking while walking. Backne and buttne. There was no experience more humiliating or existentially dispiriting than shopping for clothes. But how to explain to his mum that he would rather have nothing that properly fit than have it confirmed to him, in a mirrored torture chamber, that nothing ever *would* fit? Sleeves would never end at the right place, collars would never not be too pointy, or rise too high, or angle improperly. The buttons of every button-down shirt would always be spaced such that the penultimate one from the top made the neck opening either too constrictive or too revealing. There was a point - literally a single location in

> space – where a button might be positioned to create the natural feel and effect. But no shirt had ever been made with such a button placement, probably because no one upper-body proportions were as disproportionate as his. (79)

Even if this presentation of Sam's self-conscious idea of his body seems to depict him as the one who does not fit the world, as the one who has as a "disproportionate" body, we are also told that "Despite the near-constant regret he felt about being himself, he never confused himself for the problem. The problem was the world. It was the world that didn't fit" (81). It is exactly this the function that Other Life has for Sam, a world that did fit, in which Sam can be himself without being self-conscious. Here, we witness not only Sam's sense of inadequacy toward his body, but also how this aspect affects his relationship with clothing, to the extent that shopping for clothes is described as the most "humiliating or existentially dispiriting" experience; the infliction of pain related to trying on clothes is taken to extremes by defining changing rooms as "mirrored torture chamber" (the same expression returns, at the beginning of chapter "There are things that are hard to say today" of part V of the novel).[11]

The opposition between his uneasiness of living in his adolescent body and what he feels like to be Samanta in Other Life is then elaborated further on in the chapter:

> It was odd to have hair that never once, despite repeated and generous applications of product, rested properly. It felt odd to walk, and he often found himself slipping into an over- (or under-) stylized catwalk stride,

[11] "Wearing it was the only thing he hated more than the process of getting it: *the torture chamber of mirrors*, his mother unhelpful help […]" (409).

> whereby he swung his ass out to each side and pounded his feet into the ground as if trying not only to kill insects but to perpetrate an insect genocide. Why did he walk like that? Because he wanted to walk like nothing, an extreme effort to do so generated a horrible spectacle of horrible perambulation by someone who was such a human cowlick he actually used the world *perambulation*. It felt odd to sit in chairs, to have to make eye contact, to have to speak with a voice that he knew to be his own but did not recognize, or only recognized as belonging to yet another self-appointed Wikipedia sheriff who would never possess a biographical entry visited, much less edited, by someone who wasn't him.
>
> He assumed that there were times, other than while masturbating, when he felt at home in his body, but he couldn't remember them – maybe before he smashed his fingers? Samanta wasn't his first Other life avatar, but she was the first whose logarithmic skin fit. He never had to explain the choice to anyone else – Max was wide-eyed or righteous enough not to care – but how did he explain it to himself? He didn't wish he were a girl. He didn't wish he were Latina. Then again, he didn't not wish he were a Latina girl. (80)

Sam's discomfort in relation to his body is explained in detail in this passage, what is highlighted here is how the problem lies in the actions that his body is asked to perform, actions that are everyday actions such as sitting, speaking, having eye contact and, especially, walking. Walking is the action that is explained in greater detail; the action of walking, something that usually we might associate with human nature and deem it to be natural, non-premeditated, is for Sam the exact opposite, an action that requires effort: the appearance of naturalness is painstakingly contrived.

The parallel between reality and digitality takes a different shape here; Sam performs acts that will generally be defined unconscious, such as walking, sitting, etc., in a way that is instead described as strongly conscious. What one expects in a digital world, the idea of a mind having to control an avatar and consciously performing actions with the avatar's body, paradoxically belongs to reality. Sam turns out to be dissociated from his actual body, a body that, in Sam's case, he seems to be unable to control.

The impact of Sam's incident that caused the smashing of his fingers, a detail we have already touched upon, comes out here as the point of no return for Sam's ability to feel "at home in his body", an ability that he regains exclusively when he masturbates.

In contraposition with Sam's feeling of never being "at home in his body", Samanta as avatar is described as "the first one whose logarithmic skin fit." And this is the only explanation we have for this choice, we are told that it has nothing to do with Sam's wish to change gender or ethnic origin, it is simply a skin that fits in a world that fits, being the real world, as we have already seen earlier, the only problem. Basically, we are told that in any circumstances, Sam being an American Jewish teenager or being a Latina girl is irrelevant if the real world is the one he lives in.

In Sam's managing to fit Other Life or, as we have just said, of Other life fitting Sam, the two dimensions of his paradoxical identities, that of reality and that of virtuality, blur; we witness in the first chapter how Sam's behavior with his peers at the Hebrew school is very detached and surly, while, on the other hand, in Other Life Sam constantly chats with his virtual friends. In chapter 7 of part I, "T-H-I-S-2-S-H-A-L-L-N-'-T-P-A-S-S", we make a further step in understanding Sam

when we are told about Sam's "fake friends at school" and "real friends in Other Life" (98); Sam's perception of what is real and fake swap places with what we would commonly associate with these notions.

Other Life emerges as the world that fits for Sam for mainly three reasons: the recognition of merits, control and the possibility to be different from himself. In chapter two we are told about how the greatness of Samanta's synagogue will be recognized:

> letting everyone know that it was because of Samanta's beneficence, her fundamental goodness, her love and mercy and fairness and the benefit of the doubt, her decency, her inherent value, her nontoxic unshittiness, that the ladder to the roof existed, that the roof existed, that the perpetually buffering God existed. (19)

This possibility of greatness is miles away from what we find in chapter "T-H-I-S-2-S-H-A-L-L-N-'-T-P-A-S-S", that is Sam's sense of invisibility:

> What on earth would it take for a fundamentally good human being to be seen? Not noticed, but seen. Not appreciated, not cherished, not even loved. But fully seen. (107)

Quoting Jacob's description of Sam in his bible, Sam's need "for his positive qualities to be universally recognized, but never mentioned" (245) is what renders Other Life better than "real" life for him.

Sam is also described as very fond of being in control, something that, however, is at odds with being himself:

> Sam enjoyed knowledge. The accumulation and distribution of facts gave him a feeling of control, of utility, of the opposite of the powerlessness that

> comes with having a smallish, underdeveloped body that doesn't respond to the mental commands of a largish, overstimulated brain. (77)

The relationship between Sam's mind and his body, as we have already seen with the previous descriptions of his performing everyday actions, is here described as a sort of "physical stuttering"; as a person who stutters "exactly knows what he or she would like to say but has trouble producing a normal flow of speech" ("Stuttering"), the relationship between Sam's brain and Sam's body seems to have a similar misalignment. It is in this interstice between brain and body that Sam finds his shelter in Other Life; reality is described as the place for "good-enough", while the digital environment of Other Life is the place "for putting things how they longed to be" (20).

Despite this, Sam's obsession for perfection seems to not fit the world of Other Life either; the relocation of Samanta's synagogue shows the impossibility of perfection that Sam cannot tolerate. While previously the synagogue was exactly as Sam wanted but not in the right location, the relocation to the perfect spot creates inevitable changes, and unnoticeable imperfections, and in Sam's mind "the tiny distance from perfect rendered it shit" (21). It is this distance from perfection that makes Sam destroy the synagogue, because imperfection for Sam meant the impossibility of fully expressing himself through the synagogue. We are told so in the last chapter of part I, "The N-Word":

> Sam hadn't built the synagogue to destroy it. […] No, he built the synagogue with the hope of feeling, finally, comfortable somewhere. It wasn't simply that he could create it to his own esoteric specifications; he could be there without being there. Not unlike masturbating. But as with masturbating, if it wasn't exactly right, it was completely and irretrievably wrong. (153-154)

The two situations of Sam's full expressions, namely Other Life and masturbation,[12] are here brought together again (Sam's obsession for masturbation is unfolded in a detailed five-pages-long description in chapter "The Genuine Version" in part V of the novel).[13] They are described as situations in which "he could be there without being there." The two situations are at odds with each other; while Other Life makes Sam feel himself by escaping his body, masturbation is the only situation in which he feels "comfortable *in* his body." The action of masturbating is described later as a moment in which he "both owned and existed in his body. He was effortless, a natural, himself" (401).

It is only later in the novel that we are also told about what the most important aspect for Sam's addiction to Other Life is, namely the opportunity that such a world allows for Sam to be different from himself. In the chapter "The Genuine Version" of part V of the novel, Sam's avatar (that in this moment of the story is not Samanta anymore but Eyesick) trespasses a digital lemon grove, and in this action, we are told something important about the relationship between Sam and Other Life:

> He would never trespass in life itself. He was too ethical, and too much of a coward. (Sometimes it was hard to differentiate.) But that was one of the many, many great things about Other Life – perhaps the explanation for his addiction to it: it was an opportunity to be a little less ethical, and a little less of a coward. (394)

[12] Masturbation is recurrent theme throughout the novel not only when Sam is involved; Julia is described while masturbating with a doorknob, and an analepsis describing Jacob's visit to Israel during his early adolescent years pictures Jacob and Tamir repeatedly masturbating side by side.
[13] A tribute to Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* might be traced in this long description.

Cowardness and be ethical, two notions that here are merged into one, are characteristics that belong to Sam in his real life; Other Life is not the place where Sam feels free to be unethical or courageous, because he still feels that it is attached to his real self, he cannot completely escape from that, but somehow leaves the space for being "a little less" of himself, to loosen the aspects of himself that he despises.

In the 2008 essay "Bodies, Selves", in which the creation of alternative selves in online "virtual worlds" such as Second Life (which has been repeatedly identified as Foer's inspiration for Other Life)[14] is compared with the psychoanalytic transference, J. David Velleman argued that participants of such digital worlds perceive a difference in terms of personality between their real selves and their avatars and this is, indeed, "the major attraction of living a "second life"", namely in finding "themselves behaving like that different person rather than their real-world selves"(415). This is the case for Sam too who, however, as we already know and as this passage helps us to stress, struggles in detaching himself completely from his avatar.

The blurring between reality and digitality I have anticipated is, however, something that throughout the novel is somehow problematized by the choices made by Foer in describing Samanta's actions and the relationship between Sam and his avatar. Sam and Samanta are at times counterposed and at times merged. Let's look in detail at two paragraphs that exemplify this. The first passage, from chapter "T-H-I-S-2-S-H-A-L-L-N-'-T-P-A-S-S", describes the preparation of Samanta' bat mitzvah; for Samanta's rite of passage to adulthood all the avatars

[14] In the Washington Post's review of the novel Mark Athitakis describes Other Life as "a Second Life-style virtual site"(Athitakis), Dan Friedman in the review made for LARB (Los Angeles Review of Books) "a fictional version of Second Life"(Friedman), Alex Reside for GQ "a Second Life-y videogame"(Shephard).

gather inside the synagogue built by Sam in Other Life and their presence all together originate in Sam a reflection:

> *The pews were filled with everyone Samanta knew, people Sam never met.* They came from Kyoto, Lisbon, Sacramento, Lagos, Toronto, Oklahoma City, and Beirut. Twenty-seven dusks. They were sitting together in the virtual sanctuary of Sam's creation – they saw the beauty; Sam saw all that was wrong with *it*, all that was wrong with him. They came for Samanta, a community of her communities. (77) (emphasis added)

This passage resounds with the opposition between "everyone Samanta knew" who are "people Sam never met." This sentence underlines the distinction Sam/Samanta; what later will be labeled Sam's "real friends in Other Life" (98) here are instead exclusively Samanta's friends, Sam himself seems to be excluded from these friendships. The continuation of the passage can have, instead, a double interpretation: we are told that "Sam saw all that was wrong with *it*, all that was wrong with him" and the most immediate interpretation is that *it* refers to the synagogue, namely that in the avatars seeing the beauty of it Sam, on the other hand, can only see its imperfection (alongside with what I have just said about Sam's obsession with perfection). However, another more subtle interpretation might be that *it* refers to the situation as a whole, i.e. with the fact that all those avatars "came for Samanta" and this is something that makes Sam see "all that was wrong with him."

A couple of chapters later, before the actual bat mitzvah speech, the distinction between Samanta and Sam is instead erased:

> She looked out upon the congregation of avatars. They were trustworthy, generous, fundamentally nice unreal people. *The most fundamentally nice*

people she would ever meet were people she would never meet. (107) (emphasis added)

In this passage, we enter Sam's focalization as Samanta; Sam here fully merges with his avatar, and this is something that we can see by the use of pronouns. The strong opposition that was evident in the previous passage, and that was a sign of Sam's awareness of the distinction between him and his avatar in Other Life, seems to disappear.

While the opening sentence of the first passage and the closing sentence of the second one are very similar in meaning and structure, the clear distinction made in the former and left out from the latter creates different meanings. While we might attribute this difference to an inconsistency on the author's part (which is not to be excluded, especially considering the length of the novel) we should also consider the possibility that Foer wanted to point to two distinctive meanings, two different moments of Sam's relationship with Other Life. We said how Sam deems Other Life as the world that fits, a world in which he can escape the inadequacy of his existence, and this happens when Sam enters completely in such digital world and blurs with Samanta. On the other hand, in explicitly counterposing Sam and Samanta we can read the side effect of Other Life: the confrontation with reality and the awareness of how wrong and inadequate life "on the crap side of the screen" is for Sam. In this perspective Other Life works both as a shelter for Sam but also as an illusory, misleading environment. This may be associated with a subtle critique Foer moves toward technology, in the same vein of what he wrote in the 2013 essay "How Not to Be Alone" where he argued that "Technology celebrates connectedness, but encourages retreat."

Despite what we can define his Internet Gaming Disorder,[15] Sam's trajectory in the novel develops also outside Other Life; not only are we told that he practices cello and soccer (activities that, however, are only briefly mentioned but never represent very significant aspects of Sam's life) but, more importantly, the relationship with his first teenage love Billie is described as Sam's bond to reality and seems to slowly take Sam out of the digital world of Other Life.

Sam's trajectory in Other Life, and also his relationship with the digital world, swerves surprisingly when he and Julia returns from the ONU simulation. This sudden change has everything to do both with Samanta's death caused by Jacob, but also with Sam's reaction to it and what follows her death. At the return from the simulation, anticipated because of the news of Isaac's death, Sam goes back to Other Life, and this return is described as the one of an addict ("he went straight into Other Life, like a smoker racing to get outside Sydney Airport", 319). The unforeseen news of his avatar's death Sam acquires from a memo left on his tablet by his brother Max does not lead to the expected reaction. We are told that Sam himself is surprised by "his failure to spaz upon learning that Max wasn't playing a sick joke" (318), and that the expected reactions of anger ("breaking his iPad", "screaming things that couldn't be taken back") and desperation ("crying") remain unexpressed. Nevertheless, what initially suggests some sort of realization (the idea that, after all, Other Life and Samanta were not so fundamental in Sam's life), is immediately explicitly denied ("He wasn't in any way indifferent to Samanta's death, and he certainly hadn't reached some

[15] Also called Gaming Disorder, is defined as "as a pattern of gaming behavior ("digital-gaming" or "video-gaming") characterized by impaired control over gaming, increasing priority given to gaming over other activities to the extent that gaming takes precedence over other interests and daily activities, and continuation or escalation of gaming despite the occurrence of negative consequences" ("Gaming Disorder" n.p.).

epiphany that it was "only a game." The event of Samanta's death, however, is a turning point in Sam's relationship with Other Life. The introduction of his new avatar, Eyesick, that Sam creates "quickly and crudely" (322) to go back to his second synagogue, is distant from Sam's attempt to find a "logarithmic skin" that fits his need for self-expression as Samanta did, and has everything to do with the death of his great-grandfather, even though it reflects the same urgency. Sam's "longing" related to Other Life is substituted by Isaac's longing, as this new creation is immediately connected to Sam's last conversation with his great-grandfather. Eyesick's features bring us immediately back to Isaac's (we are told that "Sam knew that the avatar was a man" (322), and that "Sam gave himself white hair" (323)) and the changes performed in the synagogue (the avatar's agency is highlighted repeatedly when we are told that "he wasn't Sam", 322)[16] recreate the setting of Isaac's home (the synagogue is reduced to "A dining room, a living room, a kitchen. A hall. A bathroom, a guest bedroom, a TV room, a bedroom" (322), the fridge contains ginger ale, something that throughout the novel has been repeatedly told to be a guaranteed item in Isaac's home, and the chapter ends with Sam's looking for "How is bubble wrap made?" another characteristic element of Isaac's home we have been told before).

The subsequent encounter in Other Life with his Israeli cousin Noam who surprisingly recognizes Sam and decides to donate all his "resilience fruits" to him as a bar mitzvah gift during Isaac's funeral reception, has a transformative power for Sam's trajectory. At the end of chapter "Reincarnation", as the title

[16] Again, in this part of the novel we see both the blurring of Sam and his avatar ("Sam gave himself white hair") and at the same time the distinction between Sam and his avatar ("he wasn't Sam").

suggests, we are told about Sam's bursting into tears, an image that brings eventually to Sam's catharsis ("Sam was reborn", 445).

If, from this moment on we will never enter the digital world of Other Life with Sam again, it is in part VII of the novel that we are eventually told about the end of Sam's addiction for Other Life. In Jacob's bible section entitled "How to play no one", Jacob goes back to Sam's bar mitzvah; after Sam's speech Jacob decides to donate him a camera, "a Leica" (618) that once belonged to his grandfather Isaac and that Jacob had received, in turn, as a gift for his bar mitzvah. The camera is told to be representative of everything Isaac owned from his life before emigrating to the United States and this gesture that represents for Jacob a passing on of his family legacy is of paramount importance for Sam's journey out of Other Life. The Leica, indeed, is the object through which Sam's quest in the novel find its resolution. The act of refurbishment of the non-functioning camera coincides with Sam's own "refurbishment" in a functional social life, so much so that we are told that "he brought it into the world and it brought him out of Other Life" (620). The moment of Sam's Jewish coming-of-age coincides with Sam's actual coming of age in spite of his refusing the idea of becoming a man. Once again, the blurring between reality and virtuality is present in Sam's quest, the rite of passage that his life as a young Jew forces him to face is also a rite of passage for his digital life, in this case, its end.

Conclusions

The aim of my analysis of Jonathan Safran Foer's *Here I Am* was to illuminate a novel that, according to my research, has been largely ignored by critics and harshly criticized by reviewers. To do so, I attempted to outline the main features of the novel and to position it in the broader context of the contemporary American novel, using the notion of paradoxical identities as the transversal motif that unites all the main threads of the text. My analysis has been twofold: formal and thematic.

The first chapter was devoted to the narrating voice; after having established how Foer's third-person narrator, despite showing traits of omniscience, does not completely enter Paul Dawson's categorization of the return of the omniscient narrator in contemporary fiction, I entered the text to highlight how the narrator deploys his authoriality, to eventually underline that Jacob's focalization is preponderant throughout the novel. The biographical similarities between the main character and Jonathan Safran Foer himself and the choice of foregrounding Jacob's focalization begged the question concerning the author's choice of *not* employing a first-person narrator – Jacob – that I justified in light of what I deemed was the main purpose of the novel: meaningfulness. Employing James Phelan's rhetorical approach, I tried to demonstrate how restricting the narration to Jacob's voice would have hindered the author's attempt at representing the common experiences of the struggle of the American Jewish identity and of dealing with a marriage that is falling apart. Starting from this central concept, I developed the thematic cornerstones of the novel in the following chapters.

The second chapter focused indeed on Jacob, and the identity negotiations related to American Jewishness. This part of the dissertation worked toward the definition of *Here I Am* as a contemporary Jewish American novel, and was developed from what Tresa Grauer presented as two common themes in present-day Jewish American literature, namely, rituality and place. Jacob's Jewish identity is characterized by a paradoxical relationship between American secularism and observation of Jewish religious rituality, which is guided by the need for the preservation of a cultural heritage that in the novel is jeopardized by the death of the family's patriarch Isaac. The essence of Jacob's sense of Jewishness is clarified in his confrontation with his Israeli cousin Tamir, a doppelgänger-like character for Jacob. The opposition between the American Jew and the Israeli Jew, which initially questions Jacob's notion of homeland, eventually brings out Jacob's sense of belonging that turns out to be related to the Holocaust and the burden of being among the "unmurdered", feeling the obligation of living the life those who have been the victims of the Holocaust would have lived. This is the recipe for Jacob's unhappiness.

The third and last chapter of the dissertation revolved around the dissolution of the marriage between Jacob and Julia, which files the novel in the sub-genre of the family novel. As Ru Yi-Ling suggests, this sub-genre revolves around the importance of the conflicts of husband and wife, aiming at "explor[ing] the inner world of the individual and creat[ing] the multiple dimensions of a family" (112). The analysis, thus, initially focused on the dynamics of Julia and Jacob's relationship, presenting how the process of dissolution of their marriage can be traced back to two demarcation moments, a peak and an origin, the former represented by the discovery of Jacob's second phone and the latter by Sam's

incident. In focusing on these key moments, what emerged was the development of an oxymoronic relationship between physical closeness and emotional distance, created by the incompatibility between the characters' paradoxical identities as parents, spouses and individuals, and weighing mainly on sexuality and communication. In identifying the Blochs as a dysfunctional family, the analysis stressed the inability of the family members of expressing their true selves, a need that each of them fulfills outside the domestic sphere. The second part of the chapter evidenced how both Julia and Jacob develop their paradoxical identities because of the need of evading their lives, Julia escaping from her identity as a mother by designing houses just for herself, Jacob escaping his sexual frustration by sexting with his coworker and escaping the "Great Flatness" (474) of his life by creating alternative selves. Likewise, Sam develops a double life between the real world and the digital world of Other Life, the shelter he resorts to fighting the sense of inadequacy he feels toward his adolescent condition. Despite his belief in the greatness of this world, the analysis showed how Other Life's function for Sam is itself paradoxical: it functions both as a shelter where Sam feels to be able to express himself, but also as an unrealistic environment that contributes to Sam's feeling of disenchantment and dissatisfaction toward reality.

Overall, my analysis evidenced how the promise of the novel, namely the creation of situations that "force choices" that no longer allow the coexistence of paradoxical identities, remains unfulfilled. The characters, regardless of whether they find some sort of resolution or not, maintain their paradoxical identities till the very end. Even if both Sam and Julia experience what is defined as a "reincarnation" toward the end of the novel, neither of them completes the

process that may bring them out of their paradoxical identities. Indeed, Julia's reincarnation is not independent of her new marriage with Daniel, and Sam's exit from Other Life is as sudden as it is fortuitous. Jacob then, who, as the central character, is the one we expect to be at the center of the *Bildung* of the novel, shows instead no growth.

During my analysis, I also suggested how further studies on the novel may be developed, and I would like to end my dissertation by renewing these suggestions.

From a formal standpoint, I hypothesized how the pervasiveness of Jacob's focalization throughout the novel may suggest that we are not dealing with an authorial narrator but with a figural narrative in which the parts where Jacob is not directly involved are also the result of Jacob's projections of other characters' thoughts and feelings. This perspective, however, would twist what I deemed the overall aim of the novel, hindering the representation of meaningfulness. The development of such a hypothesis and the consequences that it would have on the novel's essence may be the object of further analyses.

From a thematic perspective, I mainly concentrated on the development of the novel as a Jewish American family novel concerning the dynamics concerning the nuclear family of the Blochs, Julia, Jacob and their children, while a more intergenerational approach might be included in the whole perspective of *Here I Am* within this thematic landscape. A reflection on the relationships between Isaac, Jacob's parents, and Jacob himself may complete Yi-Ling's perspective on the family novel by including the "conflicts of father and son" and the "rise and fall of a clan" (100).

What my dissertation aimed at conveying, and also how these further suggestions contribute to bolstering, is how *Here I Am*'s value resides in its richness of contents that offer multiple perspectives of analysis, proposing an all-comprehensive insight into contemporary Jewish American life.

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