

Alex's sous rature:  
the understood  
(~~strikethrough~~)  
understood mistake  
in "every..."



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Jonathan Safran Foer's novel Everything is Illuminated is a playful celebration of postmodern eclecticism, piecing together the stylistic conventions and devices of modernity, as Jean Baudrillard claimed, "...all that are left are pieces. All that remains to be done is to play with the pieces. Playing with the pieces - that is postmodern" (24). This raises the question of the relationship between the artist and the work, in late modernity and the subsequent postmodern reaction, the position of Foer. Ezra Pound would have us believe, "Any work of art which is not a beginning, an invention, a discovery is of little worth" (211), a very Cartesian observation; however, Heidegger, noting the nourishing ground in which the roots of metaphysics rests, anchoring the tree of any period's contemporary discourse, writes:... everything with which man is endowed must...be drawn up from the closed ground and expressly set upon this ground [Heidegger describes this ground as the earth, "containing everything that already is, and still hidden"]...All creation, because it is such a drawing-up, is a drawing, as of water from a spring. Modern subjectivism, to be sure, immediately misinterprets creation, taking it as the self-sovereign subject's performance of genius (73). Foer, humorously, reaches a more Heideggerean conclusion in Trachimbrod's Book of Antecedents entry on plagiarism, "God is the original plagiarizer. With a lack of reasonable sources from which to filch...the creation of man was a reflexive plagiarism; God looted the mirror" (206); nothing is simply invented or discovered out of genius, but out of attunement with what is already there or lying hidden. So what pieces does Foer play with? Foer uses a variety of techniques, displaying influence from James Joyce's Ulysses (place footnote 1), a wide array of fonts, an entire page and a half repeats, "We are writing..." (212-13), but one of the more subtle, understated, choices <https://assignbuster.com/alexs-sous-rature-the-understood-strikethrough-understood-mistake-in-everything-is-illuminated/>

is a strikethrough. The sentence containing it reads, “ But I understood (strikethrough) understood that the silence was necessary for him to talk” (157). It first appears like an editing issue, why leave it in the text? Why would the character Alex leave it in his story? It is inaccurate but by being left in the text, it seems necessary; by this, it is not an innocent strikethrough but a word placed “ under erasure” or sous rature, a deconstructive technique. Gayatri Spivak, in her preface to Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, describes the process of erasure simply as “ to write a word, cross it out, and then print both the word and deletion. (Since the word is inaccurate, it is crossed out. Since it is necessary, it remains legible.)” (xiv). It is mistaken but useful, simultaneously a cancellation and conservation, a type of *Aufhebung* (place footnote 2), but what makes it, in any sense, necessary in the text of *Everything is Illuminated* (especially since its correction is printed right afterwards)? Is it a metaphor, an intention with overflowing meaning, or is it an empty gesture? In his letter to Jonathan, dated 17 November 1997, Alex writes, “ I can be funny, because I have time to meditate about how to be funny, and I can repair my mistakes when I perform mistakes...” (Foer 144). Alex's use of sous rature is then not a mistake, but something intentional, something he wants Jonathan to see, to read, to understand, but what is he hinting to Jonathan? “ To understand” is to grasp the meaning, the reasonableness, to interpret in one of possible ways, a clear idea, but most importantly to show sympathy or a tolerant attitude towards something. Alex reveals a mistake to Jonathan, a mistake he attempts to eliminate by an effortless strikethrough, but it preserves the mistake and the need for correction, it does not disappear or go away; it is accepted, tolerated, yet never erased. Grandfather's mistake during the <https://assignbuster.com/alexs-sous-rature-the-understood-strikethrough-understood-mistake-in-everything-is-illuminated/>

Holocaust, his involvement in his friend Herschel's death, a default participation in the Holocaust, cannot be erased; sometimes in life, there are no second chances like in writing. The mistakes of a person's life can be acknowledged as horrible missteps and people can move on (understood follows understood (~~strikethrough~~)), by putting it "under erasure," it preserves the mistake itself and the awareness of it in a single stroke (the very act a type of destroying). Wars, genocides, the Holocaust - all horrible events, admitted as atrocities, the worst of mistakes - should not be forgotten, never taken off the pages of history. For those portrayed as "a good person, alive in a bad time" (145), that committed gross errors in judgment, pointing fingers to save their own life or lives of their loved ones, their actions and situation should be understood, sympathized and tolerated, but never wiped away. Alex's use of placing "understood" under erasure is a plea for Jonathan to understand his grandfather's past; just as he understood, the way his father understood, even as Alex understood the need of silence for Jonathan to persevere (157), in the way his grandfather needs a silence to persevere (a silent ~~strikethrough~~, speaking volumes without an utterance). Within the sentence "But I understood (~~strikethrough~~) understood that the silence was necessary for him to talk" (157), there is preservation, destruction, and a plea for the raising up of understanding, to be understood; preserving the dialectic, history itself, but also forgiving and moving forward. Footnotes: 1) Foer has a section lacking punctuation in the chapter "Illumination" (250-52), resembling Molly's monologue in "Penelope," and the play script format in "The Thickness of Blood and Drama, 1934," (173-77) similar to "Circe." 2) The Hegelian *Aufhebung* (literally "lifting-up") contains a double meaning of conservation <https://assignbuster.com/alex-sous-rature-the-understood-strikethrough-understood-mistake-in-everything-is-illuminated/>

and negation, going through three key phases: preserving, destroying, raising. The verb *Aufheben*, translated “to sublimate,” is to surpass while maintaining. Alexandre Kojève describes Hegel's use of the word as the way in which dialectic remains as their opposition is overcome (205). It is the very essence of *sous rature*; the very essence of Foer's novel – preservation while moving on.

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