

“We Were Talking Jewish”: Art Spiegelman’s
Maus as “Holocaust” Production

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Prologue

“He’s dying, he’s dying. *Look at him.* Tell them over there. *You saw it. Don’t forget . . . Remember this, remember this.*”

Jan Karski, speaking in Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah*

In the final comic set piece of Philip Roth’s novelistic memoir about his relationship to his father, *Patrimony: A True Story*, Herman Roth attempts to cajole his author-son into helping one of his card-playing buddies from the Y get his memoirs of World War II published. Philip is understandably resistant—especially as his father has regularly asked him over the years to aid other aspiring authors of books about home mortgages or annuity funds. Of course, a book about the Holocaust is different, and Philip even admits that he has taught Holocaust memoirs and briefly knew Primo Levi.

The invocation of Levi and the ensuing description of his suicide hardly foreshadow a comic scene. Indeed, Philip wonders

if Primo Levi and Walter Herrmann [his father’s friend] could possibly have met at Auschwitz. They would have been about the same age and able to understand each other in German—thinking that it might improve his chances of surviving, Primo had worked hard at Auschwitz to learn

This essay is dedicated to the memory of three Jewish Americans: Nina Chasen, Benjamin Chasen, and Helene Rosenzweig. I am very grateful to Nancy K. Miller and Lucia Russett for insightful readings of earlier drafts. Thanks also to Karen Winkler for providing me with the NPR interview.

the language of the Master Race. In what way did Walter account for *his* survival? What had *he* learned? However amateurish or simply written the book, I expected something like that to be its subject.

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But Walter's subject and the lesson he learned in Nazi Germany turn out to be quite different. In fact, they turn out to be comic and even obscene. According to Walter, he was "the only man left in Berlin" (212), and his memoirs are the graphic depictions of his sexual exploits with the women who hid him, quite a twist on the usual tales of heroism and betrayal. "My book is not a book like Elie Wiesel writes," Walter honestly remarks. "I couldn't write such a tragic book. Until the camps, I had a very happy war" (213). What with Katrina and Helen and Barbara, Walter's war was more a multiple orgasm than the greatest tragedy of human history.

This odd episode at the end of *Patrimony* suggests that there might be something pornographic about making images and ultimately commodities out of the Holocaust. It is as if the fundamental obscenity of the events themselves cannot be represented without a pornographic contamination of the person doing the representing. Walter seems to grasp this truth unconsciously and displaces it into farce; this is perhaps the flip side of Levi's, and many other survivors', ultimately tragic and desperate inability to redeem their experience by working through, and representing to themselves, the meaning of the camps. I think we might gain insight into this irony and angst about the decorum of representing destruction by considering it as a particularly (although not uniquely) Jewish question. Well before what has come to be known as "the Holocaust," certain aspects of the debate surrounding the Nazi genocide and the question of representation were foregrounded in Jewish discourse.¹ The examples of Roth and Art Spiegelman demonstrate

1. A word on terminology: The proper name "the Holocaust" is problematic for a number of reasons. As Art Spiegelman remarks, "Holocaust" (and another alternative, "the Shoah") has religious associations which imply that those who died were a sacrifice or burnt offering, a clear mystification of senseless violence ("Conversation"). The word "Holocaust" also has a specific history and, according to Berel Lang, emerged as the term to describe the destruction of European Jews by the Nazis only in the late 1960s. I

how a biblically mandated suspicion of idolatry and image making, as well as a cultural claim to “a kind of privileged relation to the very idea of textuality” (Shohat 9), come to constitute specifically Jewish parameters, or at least “themes,” of even secular Jewish writing.²

Roth’s self-consciousness about representation in general and his tragicomic recognition of the ungraspable contamination of representing the Holocaust form the background of *Patrimony* against which Roth frames the story of his father’s losing battle with cancer. Roth uses metaphors which call upon both timeless Jewish themes of memory and survivorship and historically specific evocations of the Nazis. Despite the father’s obstinate “survivor” mentality, Herman’s tumor, Roth writes, “would in the end be as merciless as a blind mass of anything on the march” (136). This Nazi-like image resonates uncannily with a passage from Roth’s novel *The Anatomy Lesson*. There Roth describes not his father’s actual death but an imagined version of his mother’s death (a death which in reality, we know from the chronology of *Patrimony*, must have prompted *The Anatomy Lesson*). But the categories of reality and imagination become here—as everywhere in Roth’s writing—hopelessly confused, since the fictional version *anticipates* the memoir. Nathan Zuckerman’s mother develops a brain tumor in this 1983 novel, as Herman Roth will a few years later. Admitted into the hospital for the second time, Zuckerman’s mother

was able to recognize her neurologist when he came by the room, but when he asked if she would write her name for him on a piece of paper, she took the pen from his hand and instead of “Selma” wrote the word “Holocaust,” perfectly spelled. This was in Miami Beach in 1970, inscribed by a woman whose writings otherwise consisted of recipes on index cards,

will be arguing that this moment is extremely significant for Jews in general and for *Maus* in particular. Lang proposes the more neutral “Nazi genocide” (xxi). I, however, am suspicious as a rule of the concept of neutrality, and even though I do not like the term “Holocaust” prefer to contest its production and meaning rather than ignore its power in popular imagination.

2. But see also Daniel Boyarin’s subtle consideration of the complexities of Jewish relations to the image. Boyarin demystifies the “commonplace of critical discourse that Judaism is the religion in which God is heard but not seen” (532), and his essay has implications that go beyond this religious context and are important to secular Jewish representations as well.

several thousand thank-you notes, and a voluminous file of knitting instructions. Zuckerman was pretty sure that before that morning she'd never even spoken the word aloud.

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The carefully situated Jewish mother's death serves here as a metaphor for the emergence in the Jewish community of a new understanding of "the Holocaust" in the late 1960s, an understanding which testified to the spatially and temporally displaced effect on Jewish-American identity of the extermination of European Jewry (even, or especially, for Jews comfortably situated "in Miami Beach in 1970"). The association of Holocaust and tumor forged by Roth in *The Anatomy Lesson* reappears in *Patrimony*, a memoir which further measures the health of the collective and individual Jewish body.

Patrimony's last line, and most frequently repeated motif, is a slogan often applied to the Nazi genocide: "You must not forget anything" (238). This line, which so closely echoes my epigraph from *Shoah* (cited in Felman and Laub), also occurs in the passage where Philip gives his father a bath and pays special attention to the signifier of Jewish manhood:

I looked at his penis. I don't believe I'd seen it since I was a small boy, and back then I used to think it was quite big. It turned out that I had been right. It was thick and substantial and the one bodily part that didn't look at all old. . . . I looked at it intently, as though for the very first time, and waited on the thoughts. But there weren't any more, except my reminding myself to fix it in my memory for when he was dead. . . . *You must not forget anything.*

Here, the phallic law of the father takes on the particularly Jewish imperative to "remember everything accurately" (177), a commandment metonymically linked to the contemplation of the one "substantial" organ of his father's body which resists the deterioration of time. In *The Anatomy Lesson* Roth had already connected the deterioration caused by cancer with a maternal evisceration (of body and language). In *Patrimony*—despite the holocaust of cancer and the cancer of the Holocaust—the Jewish communal body survives in and through the memory of the solidity of the father: his "substantial" penis and his "vernacular" speech, with "all its durable force" (181).

The power and ultimately the sentimentality of Roth's portrait arise from his manner of combining traditional Jewish motifs of survival, memory, and the law with a subtle evocation of the Holocaust in order to depict a particular Jewish life in the diaspora. Roth's text simultaneously exposes the potential for pornographic kitsch in his account of Walter Herrmann and draws upon a kind of emotional kitsch in the depiction of his father. Such a paradoxical stance constitutes a particular, and in this case gendered, configuration of contemporary Jewish-American identity—one in which the abuses of the Holocaust have been made manifest by years of facile mechanical reproduction, but in which the Holocaust still serves as the dominant metaphor for collective and individual Jewish survival.

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Sometimes it almost seems that "the Holocaust" is a corporation headed by Elie Wiesel, who defends his patents with articles in the Arts and Leisure section of the Sunday *Times*.

Philip Lopate, "Resistance to the Holocaust"

I resist becoming the Elie Wiesel of the comic book.

Art Spiegelman, "A Conversation with Art Spiegelman"

In moving from Philip Roth to Art Spiegelman—that is, from the comic to the comic book—the motifs of survival and suffering become radically reconfigured even as the subjects of that survival and suffering (the authors' fathers) seem so similar. Within the context of the ban on graven images and the "mystique" of the text—from which Roth derives both his pornographic ironization and his narrative sentimentalization—the two volumes of Art Spiegelman's "survivor's tale," *Maus*, come as a particular shock. *Maus* represents a new strand of Jewish-American self-construction related to but significantly divergent from Roth's writings. Spiegelman transgresses the sacredness of Auschwitz by depicting in comic strip images his survivor father's suffering and by refusing to sentimentalize the survivor. A phrase from Roth's memoir actually suits Spiegelman's depiction of his father, Vladek, better than it does that of Herman: "what goes into survival isn't always pretty" (*Patri-*

mony 126). While Spiegelman is no Walter Herrmannesque comic pornographer of the Holocaust, his use of coded animal identities for the ethnic and national groups he depicts certainly strikes readers at first as somewhat "obscene." Spiegelman even admits that going into a comic book store is "a little like going into a porno store" ("Conversation"). But the power and originality of Spiegelman's effort derive quite specifically from this shock of obscenity which demands that we confront "the Holocaust" as visual representation, as one more commodity in the American culture industry.

For Jewish readers, the challenge of *Maus* will likely be even harder to assimilate since the experience (and the memory) of the Holocaust, even for those of us who know it only at a distance, remains, fifty years later, one of the defining moments of American Jewish identity. Although the situation is beginning to change, Jewish identity remains relatively undertheorized, if overrepresented, in contemporary culture and criticism. Those of us who occupy Jewish subject positions thus come to the task of what that most talmudic of anti-Semites, Céline, has called "reading Jewish" with an impoverished set of tools to help us to examine our being-in-America.³ In this essay I will pursue a double-edged strategy, demystifying Céline's assumption of an essential Jewishness while at the same time demonstrating how Spiegelman brings a secular Jewish interpretive specificity to his rendering of the Holocaust.⁴

The need for an adequate discourse of Jewish identity strikes me as politically critical because of two phenomena which require, among other things, a specifically Jewish response: the worldwide reassertion of anti-Semitism and the relatively free rein American Jews have given to the often oppressive policies of the state of Israel. *Maus* assists us in this intellectual and political task because, even if it rarely addresses these issues directly, it does tell us at least

3. In a 1937 anti-Semitic pamphlet, Céline wrote, "J'espère qu'à présent vous savez lire 'juif' [I hope that you now know how to read 'Jewish']." This sentence is cited in Kaplan, *Relevé* 25.

4. Apart from work cited elsewhere in this essay, two critics stand out for their theoretical sophistication in attempting to understand the Holocaust and Jewishness in an American context. On the Holocaust, see James E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust* and *The Texture of Memory*. On Jewish identity, see Jonathan Boyarin, *Storm from Paradise: The Politics of Jewish Memory*. See also my review essay of Boyarin's book.

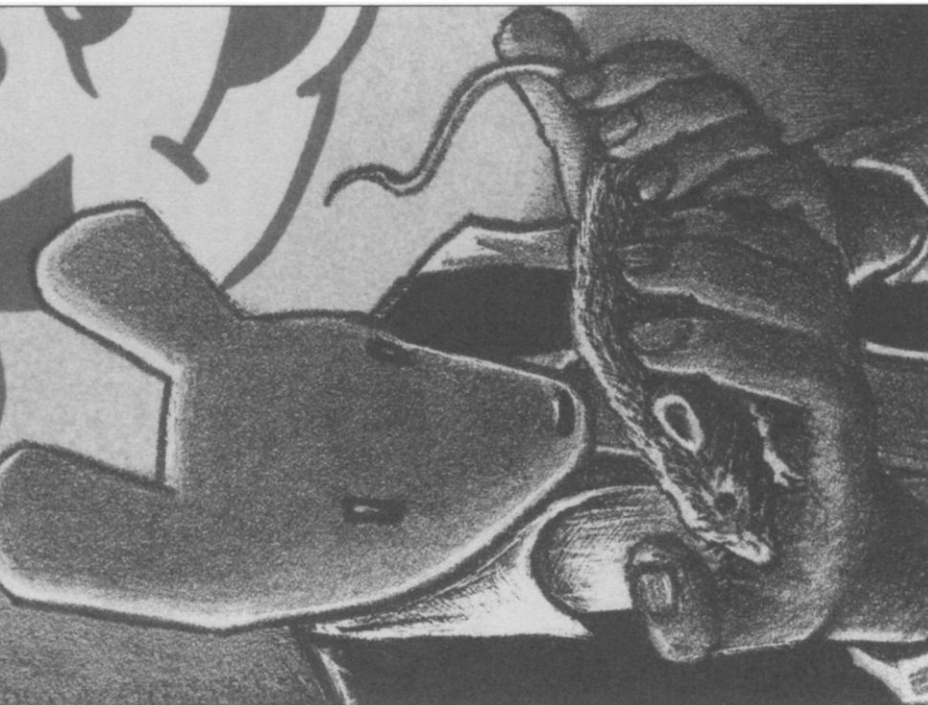
as much about the contemporary situation of Jews in the North American diaspora as about “the Holocaust.” Or rather, it meditates as much on the production of the concept of “the Holocaust” and of the concept of Jewishness as it does on Nazi inhumanity.

Maus critiques popular productions of Jewishness and the Holocaust not from a safe distance but from within, in an accessible vernacular form. In his recent “goodbye to *Maus*” comments, Spiegelman worries that his books “may also have given people an easy way to deal with the Holocaust, to feel that they’ve ‘wrapped it up’” (“Saying” 45). While the texts’ very commodity form participates in the marketing of the Holocaust—*Maus I* and *Maus II* were first “wrapped up” together in boxed sets in the 1991 pre-Hanukkah/Christmas season—they also simultaneously resist this “wrapping up.” As Robert Storr notes, Spiegelman creates a visual pun on the back cover of *Maus II* which connects the stripes of his father’s prison uniform with the stripes of the jacket’s bar code. The text’s very “wrapping” asks the reader to consider its implication in a system of economic entrapment. The self-conscious irony of this parallel between imprisonment and commodity production marks one of the many places where Spiegelman rebels against the terms of his success; such cleverness, however, reminds us that this very rebellion constitutes a large part of the artist’s appeal. This paradox, which is foregrounded everywhere in *Maus*, can be read as a comment not only on the status of memory and history in capitalist culture, but also on recent debates about the possibility and desirability of representing the Nazi genocide.

Among the last *Maus* images, which Spiegelman contributed to *Tikkun* (“Saying Goodbye”), two in particular stand out as emblematic of the dangers that the artist recognizes in mass-marketing death. In the first (fig. 1), Spiegelman draws his characteristic “Maus” self-portrait standing in front of a smiling Mickey Mouse background and gazing mournfully at a “real” mouse which he cups in his hands. The uneasy coexistence of three levels of representation in the same pictorial space literalizes the artist’s position—backed by the industry, but everywhere confronted with the detritus of the real. In the second drawing (fig. 2), the artist sits in front of a static-



92 by Art Spiegelman, reprinted with the permission of Wylie, Aitken & Stone, Inc.



filled TV screen and plays with his baby daughter, who is holding a Mickey Mouse doll; silhouetted in the background, mouse corpses hang from nooses. This drawing transposes a frame from *Maus I* (84) in which Spiegelman depicts his family (Vladek, Anja, and the soon-to-be-dead Richieu) before a backdrop of Jews hung by the Germans in a Polish ghetto. This transposition, along with the drawing of the three mice, illustrates an aspect of repetition compulsion which the work as a whole enacts. The Nazi violence lives on, with the survivor son just as much the subject and object of the terror as his father.

Spiegelman's self-portrait on the jacket flap of *Maus II* also delineates this tension inherent in the relationships between the artist, his historical sources, his representational universe, and his public artworks.⁵ Wearing a mouse mask, Spiegelman sits at his desk with *Raw* and *Maus* posters behind him and a Nazi prison guard outside the window. One morbid detail stands out: the picture reveals Art's ubiquitous cigarettes as "Cremo" brand. On page 70 of the second volume we find the key to this deadly pun when Vladek refers to the crematorium as a "cremo building." Such black humor implies that with every cigarette, with every image—and Spiegelman seems both to smoke and to draw relentlessly—he does not just represent the Holocaust, he literally brings it back to life (which is to say, death). Taken together, these disturbing portraits figure forth *Maus's* strange relationship to the ashes of the real—simultaneously haunted by the inadequacy of representation in the face of the catastrophe of history and overconscious of the all-too-real materiality that representations take on through the intervention of the culture industry.

The impossibility of satisfactorily specifying the genre of *Maus* expresses this representational paradox. After *Maus II* came out, Spiegelman requested that his book be moved from the fiction to the nonfiction bestsellers' list; but a few years earlier, in an introduction to a collection of "comix" from *Raw*, the magazine he edits with his wife, Françoise Mouly, Spiegelman remarked that he had been at work on his "comic-book novel, *Maus*" (Spiegelman and Mouly 7). While perhaps merely an artist's whim, I read this seem-

5. See also Marianne Hirsch's discussion of this self-portrait.

ing contradiction as grounded in the specificity of the problem of representing the Holocaust, an event taken at once as *paradigmatic* of the human potential for evil and as a truly *singular* expression of that potential which frustrates and ought to forbid all comparison with other events.

On the one hand, critics such as Theodor Adorno, Maurice Blanchot, and Berel Lang have suggested that “after Auschwitz,” poetry and fiction are impossible.⁶ This proscription I understand as moral rather than technical—it would be unseemly, these writers imply, to fabricate in the face of the need for testimonial and witnessing. These critics have also tended to assert that the Nazi genocide constituted a radical and unprecedented break within Western culture, an absolutist position which tends to totalize and prescribe the practices of representation in the wake of the Event. The impossibility of fiction is also true in another sense. After the Nazis’ rationalized irrationality, no horror remains unthinkable; neither the “journey to the end of night” of a Céline nor a “theater of cruelty” à la Artaud seems fantastic or unreal any longer. On the other hand, such a historical trauma also de-realizes human experience. Accounts of the death camps in memoirs never fail to document the fictional, oneiric aura that confronted the newly arrived prisoner.⁷ By situating a nonfictional story in a highly mediated, unreal, “comic” space, Spiegelman captures the hyperintensity of Auschwitz—at once more real than real and more impossible than impossible.

Yet *Maus* also replies to the debates about representation in ways which go beyond formalist subversion of generic categories and which indeed shift the terrain of the debate onto the cultural conditions, possibilities, and constraints of Holocaust representation (thus displacing the frequently prescriptive epistemologies and ontologies of the debate set by Adorno, Blanchot, and Lang). Spiegelman frankly recognizes the inevitable commodification of culture, even Holocaust culture. In *Maus*’s multimedia marketing (through magazines, exhibitions, the broadcast media, and now CD-ROM), as well as through its generic identity as a (non)fiction comic strip, Spiegel-

6. See Adorno 361–65; Blanchot 66–69; Lang 144–45. On Lang, see White 44–48.

7. See, for example, Levi and Antelme. For more on this, see Rothberg.

man's project refuses (and indeed exposes) the sentimentality of the elite notions of culture which ground the Adornean position. Spiegelman's handling of the Holocaust denies the existence of an autonomous realm in which theoretical issues can be debated without reference to the material bases of their production. He heretically reinserts the Holocaust into the political realm by highlighting its necessary imbrication in the public sphere and in commodity production.

• 2 •

My parents survived hell and moved to the suburbs.

Art Spiegelman (sketch for *Maus*)

As a primarily visual artist, Spiegelman challenges dominant representations of the Holocaust by *drawing* attention to the pornographic effect of graven images within a Mickey Mouse industry dedicated to mechanical reproduction in the name of profit. But *Maus* also operates significantly on the level of text and, in doing so, takes part in the discursive production of contemporary Jewish identity. Spiegelman makes analogies between image and text "grammar" and claims that, unlike most of his projects, *Maus* is "a comic book driven by the word" ("Conversation"). This "word" can only refer to the words of the father which Spiegelman renders not as mystical text but as fractured speech—what Roth calls, in the case of his father, "the vernacular" (181). As he makes clear in both volumes, Spiegelman created this comic book by taping Vladek's voice as he recounted his life and then transcribing the events with accompanying pictures into *Maus*. He makes a particular point of describing the pains he went to in order to ensure the "authenticity" of Vladek's transcribed voice. Many readers have testified that much of the power of *Maus* comes from the heavily accented cadences—the shtetl effect—of Vladek's narrative.⁸ Spiegelman's staging of an exhibit on the the making of *Maus* at the Museum of Modern Art, complete with the actual tapes of Vladek from which

8. Alice Y. Kaplan, wrote, for example, "Spiegelman gets the voices right, he gets the order of the words right, he manages to capture the intonations of Eastern Europe spoken by Queens" ("Theweleit" 155).

he worked, has, for most people, tended to reinforce this aura of documentary realism.

However, in a perceptive discussion of *Maus* and the MOMA exhibit, Nancy K. Miller has pointed to the illusion which grounds this version of realism:

What surprised me when I listened to the tape was an odd disjunction between the quality of the voice and the inflections rendered in the panels. For while Vladek *on tape* regularly misuses prepositions—"I have seen on my own eyes," "they were shooting to prisoners," [and] mangles idioms . . . the total *aural* effect, unlike the typically tortured *visualized* prose of the dialogue in the comic balloons, is one of extraordinary fluency.

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A particularly good example of Spiegelman's (unconscious) tendency to overdo his father's accent comes in a passage, featured in the exhibit and broadcast on *Talk of the Nation*, in which Vladek recounts the shooting of a prisoner, a shooting which reminds him of having seen a neighbor shoot a rabid dog. In the book, Art has Vladek say, "How amazing it is that a human being reacts the same like this neighbor's dog" (*Maus II* 82). But on tape, Vladek says simply and grammatically, "How amazing it is that a human being is like a dog." This passage also contradicts Spiegelman's assertion that the changes he made were dictated by the necessity of condensing Vladek's speech, since in this case he adds words. For related reasons of affect, Spiegelman occasionally alters Vladek's words to keep up with the changing language habits of contemporary English-speaking Jews, as when he renders his father's phrase "We were talking Jewish" as "We spoke Yiddish" (*Maus I* 150); this subtle semantic gentrification registers the uneasiness at the heart of Jewish identities, as well as their susceptibility to change over time.⁹

Spiegelman is right: the power of *Maus* does derive from his father's words and evocative accent. But a close analysis of these words demonstrates the artist's reconstruction of a marked dialect.

9. The evidence for this alteration comes from the exhibit "Art Spiegelman: The Road to *Maus*," at the Galerie St. Etienne, November 17, 1992–January 9, 1993. The phrase "talking Jewish" is one I heard my grandmother use, but which makes me (and, I would guess, Spiegelman) uncomfortable to hear. I suspect that the Jewish/Yiddish difference figures a generational divide.

In *Jewish Self-Hatred*, Sander Gilman discusses the perception of Jews as possessing a “hidden” and devalued language of ethnic difference called, appropriately enough for Spiegelman’s work, “mauscheln.” Gilman quotes “Hitler’s racial mentor, Julius Streicher” for his description of this perceived “hidden language of the Jews”: “Speech takes place with a racially determined intonation: *Mauscheln*. The Hebrews speak German in a unique, singing manner. One can recognize Jews and Jewesses immediately by their language, without having seen them” (312). Arguably, an element of self-hatred exists in Spiegelman’s careful “mauschelnizing” of *Maus*, displaced into aggression against the vernacular of the father. But another reading of the linguistic manipulations of the book, analogous to my reading of the images and the animal motif, would emphasize the irony, conscious or not, which uses caricature to unsettle assumptions about the “naturalness” of identities. Self-hatred and (more obviously) aggression against the father would then become not so much qualities of the work as two of its significant themes.

The source tape of the passage from *Maus II* about the shooting of the prisoner/neighbor’s dog carries another level of significance for an understanding of the verbal narration of the story. As John Hockenberry remarked to Spiegelman after playing the segment of tape on NPR, during Vladek’s telling of the story the barking of dogs can be heard in the background (“Conversation”). Nobody, including Vladek, I would guess, could definitively say whether the dogs simply triggered the memory of the association between the prisoner and the dog in Vladek’s mind, or, more radically, whether the association derived from the present circumstances of the narration. But, in either case, this example points to the importance of the moment of enunciation in the construction of a narrative.¹⁰ This narratological insight is not simply a truism of literary analysis; *Maus* everywhere thematizes the constitutive relationship between the present and different moments of the past. The importance of this temporal structure emerges in various facets of the

10. Maurice Anthony Samuels, in a very fine unpublished essay, makes a similar point about the interplay between past and present in *Maus* and reads Art as “a parody of the traditional historian in what amounts to a parody of realist historiographic methods” (49–50).

work: in the constant movement between the tense interviews between father and son and the unrolling of the Holocaust story; in the second volume's insistent self-reflexivity and thematization of writer's block; and in Spiegelman's practice—in exhibit and interview—of revealing the process of “making *Maus*.”¹¹ Not simply a work of memory or a testimony bound for some archive of Holocaust documentation, *Maus* actively intervenes in the present, questioning the status of “memory,” “testimony,” and “Holocaust” even as it makes use of them.

• 3 •

Pain is the most powerful aid to mnemonics.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*

Thus far I have not differentiated between the two volumes of *Maus*, but Spiegelman's style clearly changes during the course of the thirteen years of his work on this project. While both volumes focus on the interplay of the past in the present and the present in the past, as Spiegelman has remarked (“Conversation”), *Maus: A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History* concentrates more on the woundedness and wounding of the familial body, as its title suggests. Because Spiegelman wrote much of *Maus II: And Here My Troubles Began* in the wake of widespread popular acclaim, the second volume explicitly interrogates its own status in the public sphere, reflexively commenting on its production and interrogating the staging of “the Holocaust.” But given the serial nature of their publication in *Raw* over the course of many years, both volumes of *Maus* resist such easy binaries: the form and content of the comic

11. This practice of revealing the creation of *Maus* has reached new heights (or depths) with the production of a CD-ROM version entitled *The Complete Maus*. As well as the complete text of both volumes, the CD contains interviews with Spiegelman, writings and sketches by the author, tapes and transcriptions of Vladek, and even a family tree which allows viewers to “access” pictures of the protagonists. Although it is a valuable resource, especially with the inclusion of Vladek's original testimony, I remain doubtful whether “*Maus* in cyberspace” (as I am tempted to call it) represents a qualitative artistic advance. Rather, it seems to me another step on the road to the Spielbergization of the Holocaust, something Spiegelman generally resists.

strip's unfolding put into question the propriety of present/past and private/public distinctions.

Maus I, among its many functions, serves to catalogue "the Jew's body," an important concept in emergent Jewish theorizing which has been elaborated most fully by Sander Gilman in his book of that name.¹² In focusing on multifarious "representations and the reflection of these representations in the world of those who stereotype as well as those who are stereotyped" (*Jew's Body* 1), Gilman draws attention to the constitutive character of "difference," a category which need not succumb to the kind of binary ossification *Maus* resists. Spiegelman, like Gilman, anatomizes various Jewish bodies, including his parents' bodies and his own; he draws attention to feet (20, 83), eyes (40), hands (51), the beard (65), and the voice (throughout). Subtly but perhaps decisively different are the Jewish/mouse noses, understood in contrast to the upturned snouts of the Polish pigs. When Vladek and Anja walk as fugitives through Sosnowiec, Spiegelman shows them hiding their noses by wearing pig masks (as he himself will later don a mouse mask). But while Vladek is able confidently to feign Polishness, Anja's body leaks Jewishness, and her mouse tail drags behind her: "Anja—her appearance—you could see more easy she was Jewish" (136).

The emphasis on the body and its difference, as all commentators have noted, reinscribes the same essential ethnic differences that drove the Nazi war machine. But this discourse on the body is fundamentally destabilized by the more pressing truth about the Jewish body under Nazism which haunts Spiegelman's story: its disappearance. Richieu's and Anja's absence, and, by analogy, the absence of the millions of (Jewish and gay and Gypsy) victims, underlies Spiegelman's aesthetic choice of grappling with the Holocaust as an impossible visual text. Spiegelman's story does not seek, however, to flatten out analogous differences into a morality tale of universalist pluralism, but draws its power from negativity: an intimacy with death, pain, and loss motivates *Maus's* memory work.

In the first volume, the multiply disappeared story of Art's mother, Anja, constitutes the primary wound around which the story turns

12. Despite anatomizing a wide range of texts on Jewish themes, Gilman surprisingly makes no mention in *The Jew's Body* of Spiegelman or *Maus*.

and points to an almost erased narrative of Jewish gender relations.¹³ Anja's story is absent for three reasons, all significant: her original diaries from Poland were lost in the war (indicating the immediate destruction at the hands of the Nazis [*Maus I* 84]); Anja cannot tell her own story because she committed suicide twenty-three years after the war (indicating the unassimilable damage to the "survivors"); and Vladek later threw out her notebooks, in which she probably reconstructed her diaries (indicating the legacy of violence reproduced in some "survivors"). *Maus I* builds toward the revelation of Vladek's crime against Anja and memory, which Art names "murder" (159). Anja's suicide and Vladek's inability to mourn her death radically upset the notion of "survival" which ordinarily legitimates the Holocaust memoir; as Art puts it, "in some ways [Vladek] *didn't* survive" (*Maus II* 90). I do not think it would be an exaggeration to read this first volume as an attempt to occupy, or speak from, the impossible position of the mother's suicide; in this, Spiegelman's project resembles Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, which attempts "less to narrate history than to *reverse the suicide*" of many of its potential sources (Felman and Laub 216).

Spiegelman cannot literally reverse his mother's suicide, but he does question representations of Jewish women in his careful tracing of Anja's absent place of enunciation. Such a strategy takes on further significance given the relative lack of attention paid in dominant culture to the specific bodies and lives of Jewish women, a fact which emerges in the contrast between *Maus* and the respective academic and literary discourses of Sander Gilman and Philip Roth. In *The Jew's Body*, Gilman writes that "full-length studies of the actual roles of Jewish women in this world of representations [of the body] and their own complex responses are certainly needed and in fact such studies at present are in the planning or writing stages by a number of feminist critics." Gilman goes on to assert, however, that his own work "has generally focused on the nature of the male Jew and his representation in the culture of the West; it is *this* representation which I believe lies at the very heart of Western Jew-hatred" (5). Gilman points to the importance of the circumscribed

13. See Nancy K. Miller's and Marianne Hirsch's articles for readings of Anja's absence that have influenced my own.

penis as an index of Jewishness, but, given the tendency of the last couple of generations of North Americans of all religions to circumcise their male children, perhaps this particular symbolic structure is waning. I don't find it unreasonable to assume, for example, that in a book dedicated to "the Jew's body," Orthodox women's shaved heads or the ubiquitous Jewish mother's body would merit chapters.¹⁴

Spiegelman, like Gilman, implicitly acknowledges the "need" for inquiry into the Jewish woman's body. But Spiegelman goes further in structuring his story around just such a lack, and in repeatedly drawing attention to the gendered violence that has produced this empty space in his family history: Art's mother has had her voice forcibly removed by Vladek's stubborn annihilation of her diaries.

14. In her 1992 performance piece about the struggles in Crown Heights between Hasidic Jews and Caribbean and African Americans, *Fires in the Mirror*, Anna Deavere Smith included a perceptive monologue on Hasidic women's wigs which she immediately contrasted with the Reverend Al Sharpton discussing his "James Brown" coiffure.

I do not mean to imply that circumcision and the wearing of wigs are parallel phenomena, since only the former derives from a biblical injunction and since it holds more fully for different types of Jews (although Gilman does point out that assimilated German Jews in the nineteenth century questioned the need for circumcision [*Jew's Body* 91]). Rather, I think more emphasis needs to be placed on the *heterogeneity* of Jewish bodies across various lines of sociosexual demarcation: not "the Jew's body," then, but Jewish bodies. A full treatment of this question of Jewish women's bodies in *Maus* would need to consider the role of Art's wife, Françoise, and Mala, Vladek's second wife, whose marginalizations are not always treated as self-consciously as the question of Anja (see Hirsch on this topic).

A broader account of gender politics in Spiegelman's work would also consider his controversial Valentine's Day cover for *The New Yorker* (February 15, 1993), which featured a painting of a Hasidic man kissing a black woman. A fairly direct reference to the same tensions explored by Smith in her performance, this "Valentine card" succeeded only in enraging black and Jewish communities. Spiegelman's avowedly utopian wish that "West Indians and Hasidic Jews . . . could somehow just 'kiss and make up'" (qtd. in "Editors' Note" 6) was directed at racial tensions but did not take account of the intersection of race with gender and sexuality. The image of a white man with a black woman connotes a whole history of sexual exploitation grounded in racial domination, while, on the other hand, a Hasidic man (as Spiegelman does acknowledge) is forbidden to touch a non-Jewish woman. With respect to the present context, I would also note the (not) accidental erasure of the Jewish woman (as well as the presumably threatening black man) from this vision of reconciliation. The scenario effectively points to an ambiguity of Jewish "ethnicity": Jews will, depending on the context, appear as white, as other than white, or as both simultaneously (as here).

The fictional and nonfictional writings of Philip Roth, which (I have already argued) also mobilize family stories and historical motifs to reconfigure Jewish-American identity, similarly foreground the gender asymmetry of those very stories. But—in contrast to Spiegelman's portrait of Anja—Roth renders his fictional mother, Selma Zuckerman, as essentially and eternally without language: her writing, for example, is belittled as consisting only of recipes, thank-you notes, and knitting instructions. In *Patrimony*, he depicts his real mother not as a producer of language but as an archive; this “quietly efficient” woman was “the repository of our family past, the historian of our childhood and growing up” (36). There are, in the memoir, suggestions of a kind of patriarchal violence analogous to that enacted by Vladek—Bessie Roth's “once spirited, housewifely independence had been all but extinguished by [Herman's] anxious, overbearing bossiness” (36)—but, unlike Anja, Bessie is never granted an autonomous voice which transcends the domestic sphere. Although she presided within what Roth calls “her single-handed establishment of a first-class domestic-management and mothering company” (37), the mother's restriction to this limited space by a patriarchal Jewish culture never becomes thematized since *Patrimony*, as its title suggests, is first and foremost the story of “the male line, unimpaired and happy, ascending from nascency to maturity” (230). The mother is notably absent from (although one wonders if she has taken) the family photograph which inspires this last formulation and which adorns *Patrimony's* cover.

Both Roth and Spiegelman present narratives in which a certain version of history, the family, and the Holocaust implicitly disappears with the mother in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Selma Zuckerman dies after substituting “Holocaust” for her own name; Bessie Roth, the family “repository” and “historian,” is “extinguished” upon Herman's retirement in the mid 1960s; and Anja takes her Holocaust testimony to the grave in 1968. In their wake, the history of the family and the “race” devolves into the hands of what Paul Breines, in a recent attempt to characterize post-sixties Jewish maleness, has called a “tough Jew.” These three “tough” figures—Nathan, Herman Roth, Vladek—are all equally well described by what Roth calls “obsessive stubbornness” (*Patrimony* 36).

The quality is indeed ambiguous, seeming to provide at once the means for survival in difficult situations (whether historical or medical) and the resources for self- and other-directed violence in domestic and public spheres. While Roth's writing certainly produces ambivalent feelings about the "tough Jew," only Spiegelman foregrounds the ways in which this new Jewish subject has emerged through the repression (in two senses) of Jewish women's bodies and texts and the ways in which it can initiate new tales of violence.

The insertion into *Maus I* of the previously published "Prisoner on the Hell Planet"—the story of Anja's death—not only presents an expressionist stylistic rupture with the rest of the work but reopens the wound of the mother's suicide by documenting the "raw" desperation of the twenty-year-old Art. We should not read "Prisoner," however, as a less mediated expression of angst, despite its "human" characters and the reality-effect of the inserted 1958 photograph of Anja and Art. Rather, the "presence" of the maternal body here vainly attempts to compensate for what, many years later, remain the un mournable losses of Anja's suicide and of the years of psychic and political suffering which her life represents for Art. "Prisoner" draws attention to itself as at once *in excess* of the rest of *Maus*—a "realistic" supplement framed in black—and *less than* the mother (and the history) it seeks to resuscitate. With artist's signature and date (1972) following the last frame, "Prisoner" also complicates *Maus's* moment of enunciation—it simultaneously stands apart temporally and spatially from the rest of the work and yet is integrated into it. Like Art in this segment and throughout *Maus*, "Prisoner" cannot hide its difference from the totality of the family romance, but nor can it fully separate from the mother's story.

• 4 •

By highlighting, once again, the complexity of the time of enunciation in *Maus*, "Prisoner" points to the possibility of reading the work as part of a historical process which Spiegelman has focalized through the family, but which opens into questions of public culture and politics. The moment of Anja's suicide—May 1968—serves as a touchstone for the countercultural rebellion which obviously informs Spiegelman's work. In the same year that "Prisoner" ap-

peared in an underground comics magazine, for example, Spiegelman edited an (explicitly) pornographic and psychedelic book of quotations, *Whole Grains*. This book, dedicated to his mother, foreshadows some of the irreverence, eclecticism, and black humor of *Maus* (and even contains the Samuel Beckett quotation that Art cites in *Maus II* [45]), but it serves more as a marker of the cultural material of Spiegelman's life/career than as a developmental stage on the road to his masterpiece. The sixties cemented Spiegelman's identity as an artist, putting him in touch, through the underground comics scene, with other "damned intellectuals"; in *Maus* and in the pages of *Raw*, he continues this tradition of underground comics-with-a-message, even after "what had seemed like a revolution simply deflated into a lifestyle" (Spiegelman and Mouly 6).¹⁵

Besides constituting a moment of general cultural upheaval, the late sixties inaugurated a new era for Jews in North America, one which would provide the sociological setting in which and against which Spiegelman would create *Maus*. Around this time "the Holocaust" took on its central articulated importance in Jewish life—and it did so in a particular context. As Jewish liberation theologian Marc Ellis writes,

It is in light of the 1967 war that Jews articulated for the first time both the extent of Jewish suffering during the Holocaust and the significance of Jewish empowerment in Israel. Before 1967, neither was central to Jewish consciousness; the Jewish community carried on with a haunting memory of the European experience and a charitable attitude toward the fledgling state. After the war, both Holocaust and Israel are seen as central points around which the boundaries of Jewish commitment are defined.

(3)

For Ellis, it is imperative that Jewish people of conscience pass beyond the now problematic dialectic of innocence and redemption which poses all Jews as innocent victims and sees the state of Israel as a messianic redemption. Theology—indeed all discourse—that partakes of the innocence/redemption dialectic ultimately serves as a legitimating apparatus for Jewish chauvinism and for the Jew-

15. For an essay which situates *Maus* within a tradition of Jewish comics, see Buhle. For a consideration of *Maus* as part of the emergent genre of the comic-novel, see Orvell.

ish state, since, within its terms, we cannot acknowledge Jews as themselves victimizers, either as individuals or as a collective.

Spiegelman's *Maus* operates precisely in this troubled space "beyond innocence and redemption." The Jewish subjects he produces are certainly not innocent (they're barely likable), nor have they found redemption in Rego Park, the Catskills, Soho, or indeed anywhere. The depiction of Vladek—a survivor—as a purveyor of violence in his own home, especially against his second wife, Mala, raises the crucial question of how a people with such a long history of suffering (one which continues to the present) can in turn become agents of violence and torture.¹⁶ While neither volume of this comic strip addresses the question of Israel/Palestine (except for one ironic aside in *Maus II* [42]), in an interview Spiegelman makes a rather interesting comment which I believe invites this contextualization. During the discussion of *Maus* on NPR, Spiegelman alludes to the newscast which had opened the show. The top three stories, he notes, were on Pat Buchanan, South Africa, and an Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon in which Israeli tanks crushed UN peace-keeping vehicles. Spiegelman calls these three disturbing news stories evidence of the "constant reverb" of the past into the present which *Maus* seeks to illuminate, "if you dig my drift." The drift is that for post-1967 diasporic and Israeli Jewish communities, any text which explicitly challenges sentimental renderings of the Holocaust also implicitly challenges that tragedy's dialectical double—the legitimacy of Israeli incursions into Arab land.¹⁷

In the United States today, for Jews to speak out against the policies of the state of Israel, or to question the uses to which the Holocaust has been put, almost guarantees them unofficial excommunication from the Jewish community.¹⁸ Although it carefully and

16. For information on Israeli torture in the Occupied Territories, see the report by the Israeli human rights group B'Tselem.

17. For a memoir by a Palestinian living in Lebanon which movingly addresses the latter side of this dialectic (among other issues), see Makdisi.

18. Unfortunately, this situation seems to remain true even after the recent mutual recognition of the Palestine Liberation Organization and Israel. I would hypothesize that this event will in the long run produce major changes in the parameters of Jewish identity configurations; however, it remains too early to tell what those realignments will look like (or what the political ramifications of this flawed agreement will be for Palestinians).

provocatively explores the specificity of different generations of Jewish-American identity, *Maus* does not explicitly raise the question of American Jews' relation to the policies of Israel. To do so would have been (in my opinion) to lose the mass audience so important to the book's effect among Jews and non-Jews. Revealing Jewish racism against African Americans, as Spiegelman does (*Maus II* 98–100), falls within the mainstream realm of possibility and might be considered part of a coded effort to demystify Jewish-American complicity with the state-sponsored crimes of Israel.

In any case, the true strength of Spiegelman's critique comes from his presentation of a people situated "beyond innocence and redemption," in that implausible ethical space which Jews must occupy in relation to their troubled history. In this sense, I believe, Spiegelman avoids what Edward Said has justly called "a *trahison des clercs* of massive proportions," the "silence, indifference, or pleas of ignorance and non-involvement [on the part of Jewish intellectuals which] perpetuate the sufferings of [the Palestinian] people who have not deserved such a long agony" (xxi). To remember genocide without abusing its memory, to confront Jewish violence while acknowledging the ever present filter of self-hatred—these are the difficult intellectual tasks which mark the minefield of identity explored in *Maus* through the "lowbrow" medium of comics.

Maus as a whole works through the desacralizing and secularization of Jewish experience, but the second volume, in particular, marks a further crisis in Jewish identity. Through a staging of his own anguish at the success of the first volume, Spiegelman interrogates the ambivalent concept of Jewish power, especially the cultural capital won through the re-presentation of the Holocaust. Spiegelman condenses in one frame (which has attracted the attention of nearly all commentators) the various forces which unsettlingly intersect in *Maus*. At the bottom of the first page of the chapter "Auschwitz (Time flies)" (*Maus II* 41), Spiegelman draws Art seated at his drawing board on top of a pile of mouse corpses. Outside his window stands the concentration camp guard tower which also figures in his "about the author" self-portrait; around the man in the mouse mask buzz the "time flies." Art's thought bubbles read, "At least fifteen foreign editions [of *Maus*] are coming out. I've gotten 4 serious offers to turn my book into a T.V. special

or movie. (I don't wanna.) In May 1968 my mother killed herself. (She left no note.) Lately I've been feeling depressed." Meanwhile, a voice-over—revealed in the next frame as a camera crew—calls ambiguously, "Alright Mr. Spiegelman . . . We're ready to shoot!" Among other meanings hovering, like the flies, in this frame, the overlay of positions and temporalities communicates an important fact about anti-Semitism: its effects persist across time and situation; someone is always "ready to shoot," even when no Nazis are visible and the media is under your control.

But the successful, avant-gardist artist has another difficulty to confront: his own implication in the scene. Who, after all, is responsible for the corpses at Art's feet, this frame asks? How would Spiegelman draw a pile of Palestinian corpses, I wonder? Art lets us know that he started working on this drawing in 1987, the same year the *intifada* brought Israeli repression into renewed focus, thus ending the triumphalist era which ensued from the 1967 war and putting the Holocaust/Israel dialectic under increasing pressure in mainstream American politics.

Art's guilt and depression, as thematized here, arise from his inability to make his mother reappear or the corpses (past and present) disappear. Instead, he finds himself unwillingly positioned as a willing victim of the culture industry. This industry—against which Spiegelman constantly defines himself—underwent its own crisis in the years between the publication of the two volumes of *Maus*. Articles proliferated on the deterioration of American publishing, and Spiegelman's own publisher, Pantheon, underwent a change in direction which caused an uproar among intellectuals concerned about the disappearance of nonmainstream work. In *Maus II*, Art finds that he can actively resist such commodification only through the contradictory gesture of directly addressing his audience and thus assuring that his success—based in the first place on such self-consciousness—will continue. Art's subsequent conversation with his shrink, Paul Pavel (who died in 1992), carries this double bind to its logical (in)conclusion. Pavel, a survivor, wonders whether, since "the victims who died can never tell THEIR side of the story . . . maybe it's better not to have any more stories." Art agrees and cites the aforementioned Beckett quotation—"Uh-huh. Samuel Beckett once said: 'Every word is like an unnecessary

stain on silence and nothingness"—but then realizes the bind: "On the other hand, he SAID it" (*Maus II* 45).

The impossibility of staying silent—which Spiegelman's ceaseless work on *Maus* embodies—entails what Marianne Hirsch, following psychiatrist Dori Laub, has called "the aesthetic of the testimonial chain—an aesthetic that is indistinguishable from the documentary" (26), and that calls the reader into the story. The most striking example of this process, as Hirsch notes, comes at the end of the second volume when Spiegelman includes a photograph of his father taken just after his escape from the Nazis. This picture, sent to Anja as proof of his survival, was taken under strange circumstances: "I passed once a photo place what had a *camp* uniform—a new and clean one—to make *souvenir* photos" (*Maus II* 134). This photo, which could have been taken of anyone, survivor or not, "dangerously relativizes the identity of the survivor" (Hirsch 25). Taken out of the context of Vladek's message to Anja, it also marks the becoming-kitsch of the Holocaust. Thanks to the miracle of mechanical reproduction, anybody can be a survivor! Philip Roth draws on a similar iconography, but, at least in *Patrimony*, he leaves out Spiegelman's self-conscious ironization. Roth seeks to wrap his father simultaneously in the uniforms of sentimentality and "tough" Jewish survivorhood, a strategy which, we have seen, works through the abjection, or at least forgetting, of the mother's experience.

Spiegelman's relationship to the photograph is more complicated. He clearly recognizes the sentimental tradition it inaugurates, *but he also has to use it*: "I need that photo in my book," he exclaims (134). In a gesture worthy of Beckett, *Maus* "stains" the "clean" uniform of Jewish suffering in the Holocaust; it reveals the impure basis of all Auschwitz *souvenirs*. Spiegelman "needs" to offer us this uniform because it figures the act of reading: for those living "after Auschwitz" (even those who, like Vladek and Anja, lived through Auschwitz), the uniform provides a kind of access, albeit highly mediated, to the events themselves. As a "site of memory" (see Nora) the photograph—and by extension the book which contains it—creates the space of identification which Spiegelman relies on for affective and artistic success.

But identifications are always multiple, unforeseeable, and tinged with repudiation; readers are at least as likely to refuse to empa-

thize with Vladek and instead to occupy Art's trademark vest—offered as a souvenir by an entrepreneurial “dog” (*Maus II* 42). The vest, as opposed to the uniform, represents the power and risk of writing (and drawing): the ability and the need of those raised in what Hirsch calls “post-memory” (8) to reconfigure their parents' stories without escaping either their failure to revive the dead or their recuperation by a dominant non-Jewish culture. Between the vest and the uniform, *Maus* unravels as “a survivor's tale” of “crystalline ambiguity.”¹⁹ Spiegelman demonstrates how “the Holocaust” ultimately resists representation, but he uses this knowledge as authorization for *multiplying* the forms of portraiture. In this mongrelized, highbrow/lowbrow animal tale, ethnic and familial identities hover between a painful present and an even more painful past, between futile documentary and effective fiction. Simultaneously reproducing and recasting Holocaust history, *Maus* partakes of the melancholy pleasures of reading, writing, and talking “Jewish.”

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19. Spiegelman claims that the phrase “crystalline ambiguity” was his favorite description by a critic of *Maus* (“Conversation”). The only other place I've seen the phrase is in Spiegelman's own comments in *Tikkun*, where it appears unattributed. Talk about taking self-reflexivity seriously!

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