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## Forced Confessions: The Case of Art Spiegelman's *Maus*

EMILY MILLER BUDICK

**W**e aren't even past the first chapter of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* when the father exacts a promise from the son that the son will violate over and over again in the writing of his text. Certain "private things, I don't want you should mention," Vladek admonishes his son.<sup>1</sup> From beginning to end, *Maus* violates that promise. Indeed, the violation first occurs in a kind of negative speech act in which the assertion of the son's words "I promise" is abrogated in the narrative's breaking of that promise. From its inception, then, the text as text constitutes a sustained act of violation: a narrative that narrates what is forbidden to say. Indeed, as comic-book art, in which human beings are rendered in the figures of animals, *Maus* produces a kind of heightened, excessive fictionality that breaches a second taboo in Holocaust writing as well: the requirement that Holocaust fiction produce historically valid, reliable narratives—narratives that might "prove" the events that they record.<sup>2</sup>

What, if anything, justifies Spiegelman's telling of his father's story against his father's objection, which is essentially his plea that his privacy not be violated and that he not be resubjected to one more version of that humiliation of exposure that he was made to suffer during the Holocaust? Is the simple fact that an event occurred sufficient warrant for telling it? And telling it how? What might legitimize this second violation enacted by Spiegelman's text, its move toward fictionalized narrative?

Like much historical fiction, Art Spiegelman's *Maus* is a ghost story, but a ghost story in a double sense. Not only does it concern ghosts of the past, but as a

text in which dialogue is as much drawn as articulated, it is spoken in a strangely disembodied, ghostly voice, as if the authorial voice itself were a ghost of sorts as well. Before launching into my critique of this text, I want to state my conclusion: by the end of the narrative, Art, the author, in part by portraying himself through his less successful, less reliable alter ego Artie, has transformed his role from implicated, even aggressive, narrator-participant into a sort of detached psychic medium who consents, despite his own discomfort and self-endangerment, to let the voice of the past speak directly and unmediated not so much to him, as through him; furthermore, he permits that voice to speak not only to us, the readers of the text, but to the many ghosts that constitute this past. The artist's taking himself out of the text is not entirely successful. It does not completely lay to rest his accusations against and resentments of the past, nor our reservations concerning his use of it. Nonetheless, by the end of the text, something of great significance for Spiegelman the literal author and for us as readers of Holocaust fiction generally—and of this Holocaust fiction in particular—has been achieved. In order to see the process whereby Spiegelman's text proceeds to its profound results, one must first, in tandem with the author-protagonist, travel the course of the text through its deep and troubled self-involvement and its virtual exploitation or appropriation of the past whose story it tells, a problem that, as I have already suggested, is not entirely dispelled by the distance achieved between the character Artie and his creator, Art.

From the start, it is clear that neither the author Spiegelman nor his protagonist/alter ego is a historian (however much he would like to be)<sup>3</sup> and that the historical veracity of the story (or, at least, that of the primary tale that the story seems to be telling—namely, the father's experience of the Holocaust) is not its only, perhaps not even its primary, justification or goal. Not only does the subtitle of the first volume of *Maus, A Survivor's Tale*, which is *My Father Bleeds History*, do away with the pretense of the historian's distance and objectivity by expressly identifying the intimate and (given the clichés pertaining to fathers and sons) likely fraught relationship between the narrator and his protagonist, the titling further identifies the father's pain as not belonging to the father alone: it is also a bleeding into the life of the son. Even more startling is the fact that the primary title of the work, repeated in both volumes, launches a claim that—implicitly, at least—places in hostile opposition what emerge as the tales of two different and antagonist

survivors: the father who has survived the war, and the son who has survived the father. This survival of the son becomes less than figurative in the second of the two books, when the father actually dies, leaving the son to tell the story on his own and making of that telling something akin to much Holocaust narrative and historical writing generally: a story told in the living present about those who are no longer here to tell their stories themselves.

Like the vast majority of the players in any historical drama—and, in particular, those millions of individuals who did not survive the Final Solution—the survivor father by the end of the tale has become a nonsurvivor whose story can only be perpetuated by a narrative voice not his own. But the survivor son who tells the story—indeed, who cannot escape the burden of historical narrative—is, as a survivor of this inherited trauma, struggling to survive what is not only the bleeding away of the father's life (the father, we are told, is suffering from a heart condition) but the flow of his already hemorrhaging life's blood into that of the son. From the son's perspective, this phenomenon is more than the inevitable running of one consciousness, as of one color, into the other, which characterizes all our familial and communal existences. Rather, the son experiences his inheritance of his father's history as nothing less than an assault, however unintentional, on the part of the father—a demand, as it were, for a kind of psychic transfusion by which the father, unconsciously transferring his trauma onto his son, might draw sustenance from the child.

For this reason, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* begins with an act of subversion whereby what most readers surely assume is the secondary of the two survivor tales, the presumably occasional and secondary frame narrative of the son's acquisition of his father's history, asserts its primacy over the other tale, thus “framing” the father's narrative in quite another sense. Indeed, the frame narrative identifies how the son's psychoanalytically informed autobiographical investigation of his father's history is a reversal of the psychic processes that have rendered the father's untold history the determinative metaplot of the son's actual mental life, the primary and controlling narrative. In these opening frames, Artie the son remembers his father intently bent on “fixing something” while the son hobbles in on a broken skate, in tears, his friends' having abandoned him, asking for his father's help—asking, in other words, for his father to fix him and fix his world, only to have his father lay down doubly the

laws of the post-Holocaust universe. “Friends? Your friends?” he says to him, expressing a survivor’s knowledge. “If you lock them together in a room with no food for a week . . . THEN you could see what it is, friends!” (1:5–6). Fixing something else (perhaps himself), the father not only articulates his knowledge of the unfixability of the world, but he precisely refuses the son such comfort as he is capable of rendering. The subtitle of volume 2 identifies what we come to realize is the subtext of volume 1 as well. *Here My Troubles Begin* does more than blur the distinction between father and son, making unclear whose troubles the tale tells and where the one begins and the other lets off. Rather, the subtitle levels an accusation against the father. It is as if the psychoanalytically informed narrative would force the father finally to fix the son, even posthumously, and quite against the father’s refusal (both explicit and inadvertent) to do so.

Not for naught, then, does Spiegelman represent his father as exercising on a stationary bicycle during much of the present time of the narrative. Whether the father’s intention or not, the son perceives him as ever trying to outdistance, perhaps even (so far as the bike is part of Vladek’s lifelong health regime) to outlive him. “No matter what I accomplish,” Artie tells his psychiatrist, voicing the complaint of many a survivor child, “it doesn’t seem like much compared to surviving Auschwitz.” His father, he reveals, actively contributed to this feeling: what he most especially recalls of the past is “being told that I couldn’t do anything as well as he could” (2:44). Counting his pills at the opening of the second chapter of volume 1—another activity that frequently accompanies their conversations—the father, who is represented throughout the text, even in the prewar period and even in relation to his wife, as opportunistic and exploitative, says, “I must fight to save myself” (1:26; his choice to marry Anya, who isn’t, he tells us, particularly beautiful, is to some significant degree motivated by her father’s money; he refuses to permit her to continue her political activism and considers not marrying her when he discovers her own pills in the family medicine cabinet). Vladek is addicted not only to using but to counting his pills and riding the exercycle that keeps his heart pumping even as Artie the son is trying to engage his father in his own lifesaving activity. No wonder Artie feels that his father is attempting to outsurvive both of them and the narrative as well. Yet, represented as endlessly spilling out and miscounting the pills, riding nowhere, Vladek is kept by his son’s still-life drawings (as much as by his own

life choices) permanently in place. Is Art in every sense his father's son, inheriting, repressing, and hysterically reenacting his father's behaviors, including the powerful drive to save himself? And is he as entitled as his father was and is to save himself, even at his father's expense? "It's so claustrophobic being around Vladek," Artie's wife independently confirms about him (2:22), as Vladek launches his bid for the young couple to move in with him, first in the country, and later at home in Rego Park. "He drives me CRAZY," Artie confesses (2:14); and the son seems to have no alternative but to flee for his life—into the comic strip itself as much as in any other way. Is this not all of our situations in relation to the past, and isn't art one way we have of thus saving our lives? Indeed, the son's own talent for comic-book art is something the text identifies as Artie's inheritance from his father, who is shown to be a skillful draftsman (1:112), not to mention a man of some humor, as he coaxes his wife back to good spirits after her depression (1:35).<sup>4</sup>

Throughout the text, the son accuses the father of crimes against himself, to which the son testifies and finds his father guilty. He is witness for the prosecution several times over, and *Maus* is, in many ways, frame after still-life frame, the son's punishment of, and even incarceration of, his father. This is not what is usually meant by the term "witnessing" in the psychoanalytically informed literature on Holocaust narratives, in which genre *Maus* clearly participates. In their volume of essays entitled *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub identify the importance of this witnessing of the survivor's story. Such witnessing serves to validate and thereby make real an experience that threatens the self with self-annihilation and obliteration because of the essential quality of trauma to bypass conscious knowledge. In the case of the Holocaust, this bypassing of consciousness was deliberately plotted by those administering the trauma, thus intensifying the general case of traumatic experience.<sup>5</sup>

As Freud understood from the start, it takes two to witness the unconscious. Hence, the job of psychoanalysis is largely to provide an external witness to the internal processes of mind that the subject himself or herself may not be able to bring into focus. By bringing the unconscious into consciousness, the individual is presumably enabled to confront and surmount the compulsions, obsessions, and anxieties produced by repressed, unconscious memories. Art(ie) Spiegelman, tape

recorder in hand, would seem, in line with the contemporary push for testimony archives, to be witnessing the survivor's experience and more, recording it for posterity. But the problem with this line of argument in relation to *Maus* is, of course, that despite the fact that Vladek exhibits many hysterical, repressive behaviors that might well lend themselves to psychotherapeutic treatment, he in no way asks for or benefits from his son's "witnessing" of these events. On the contrary, he is, if anything, retraumatized by his son's ventures into witnessing his historical past. We are given a miniature version of the problem of the text as a whole within the text itself in the form of the son's earlier venture into comic-book history, when he publishes the story of his mother's suicide and his father accidentally comes upon it. Reading the son's account of his mother, the father, though sympathetic with the son's need to do this—as he is in relation to the son's entire oral history project in relation to himself—is both hurt and horrified: "I saw the picture there of Mom, so I read it . . . and I cried. . . . It's good you got it outside your system. But for me it brought in my mind so much **memories** of Anya" (1:104). Had he lived, his response to what he might read in *Maus* as a whole would likely not be much different.

Though the historian in us inclines toward sharing Artie's outrage at his father's destruction of the mother's diaries, which might seem to us either self-protective or vindictive on the part of the father, nonetheless we might wish to credit the father with a certain sense of decorum and protectiveness concerning his wife (as he demonstrates concerning Artie himself), though such decorum might well evidence the same repressive behavior that characterizes almost all of Vladek's responses. (Is decorum itself, always and everywhere, a form of repression?) Nonetheless, for all his failings, Vladek Spiegelman respects the rights and privileges of others, especially the family, as evidenced by his wartime behavior.

Of course, one reason that the son fails to provide the father with appropriate witnessing is that he is himself a traumatized victim in need of the services of psychotherapeutic intervention (which, the text reveals, he is receiving). And just as Artie is no historian, so he is no psychoanalyst. This is repeatedly made very clear for us, as when Artie interrupts his father's narrative free-flow and associative thought to demand from him that he keep the "story chronological" so that he can "get it straight" (2:82). This demand prompts his father to reply, "So? . . . Okay, I'll

make it so how you want it," which is succeeded in the very next frame by Vladek's recalling the "**ORDER**" that "All Jews of Sosnowiec must be relocated into the Stara Sosnowiec quarter by January 1, 1942" (2:82). The motions of Vladek's mind are very clear: he is being made to obey orders and dictates not his own, and he complies. Just as he would forgive the son his violation of his mother's memory so he will consent to order the events of his life according to his son's wants, by which means those memories will themselves also undergo narrative violation.

The problem with the son's use of his father's history is nothing so simple as what might well pertain to texts like Sylvia Plath's "Daddy" or William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*, both of which have seemed to readers self-serving, less in the interests of historical commemoration than as parts of the writers' personal literary agendas. Art(ie) is the son; his father's history is directly relevant to his. It is genuinely his story, if only by reason of inheritance and blood. Yet since no parent and no history is any less a source of the troubled life of its inheritors than Art(ie) Spiegelman's is for him, the question that the text nonetheless raises is how we ever tell the story of the past without rendering it the subject of our personal animosities and resentments, as much a veil for the narcissistic indulges of the self's pursuit of itself as a field of inquiry about other people's lives and sufferings. The problem, in other words, is not simply the provinces of the fictionalizing or metaphorizing imagination (as it is, say, in the Plath and Styron texts), but our relationship to the facts of other people's lives, even when we are intent upon remaining loyal to the facticity of them. The issue is our rights and privileges concerning the secrets of the past, even—or especially—when we feel that our own lives and those of our children are at stake.

As Dominick LaCapra understands the work of the historian in relation to the events of the past, in particular, traumatic histories like the Holocaust, "transference is inevitable to the extent that an issue is not dead, provokes an emotional and evaluative response, and entails the meeting of history with memory. When confronting live issues, one becomes affectively implicated." Therefore, what is needed by the historian is a form of "working through" that

requires the recognition that we are involved in transference relations to the past in ways that vary according to the subject-positions we find

ourselves in, rework, and invent. It also involves the attempt to counteract projective reprocessing of the past through which we deny certain of its features and act out our own desires for self-confirming or identity-forming meaning. By contrast, working-through is bound up with the role of the problematic but significant distinctions, including that between accurate reconstructions of the past and committed exchange with it.<sup>6</sup>

LaCapra says of *Maus* specifically,

Artie has an insistent and pervasive preoccupation with recording his father's story, which is dangerously close to becoming the master narrative of his own life. But he nowhere sits himself down and asks about his own motivations and reasons or directs at himself the dogged scrutiny to which he subjects his father. Indeed, in certain ways, he becomes a Jew or assumes a Jewish identity . . . through his concern with the Holocaust—a concern that nonetheless escapes sufficient critical examination.<sup>7</sup>

As LaCapra also suggests, Art Spiegelman the author is, in fact, aware of the transference aspects of his narrative.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, he goes out of his way to acknowledge the framing of the father's story with his own. These acknowledgments range from the self-conscious references to and representations of the protagonist/author's own history of psychoneurosis and the psychoanalysis attendant upon it to the depiction of other autobiographical materials (including the collection of data that goes into the construction of the text) to the drawing of the story in comic-book images, which confesses the author's understanding of the fictionalizing operations of private consciousness to which the father's story has been subjected. Nonetheless, the author-son Spiegelman, and not only his fictional representative Artie, does frame his father in ways not to be so easily evaded by the text's various gestures of self-revelation. Indeed, through Art's exposure of Artie's unconscious repetition of his father's neuroses (albeit transmuted by his upper-middle-class American upbringing and existence), the reader might be brought to feel not only the necessity

of Art(ie)'s working through the trauma of survivor-son status but, through Art's successful recovery, the value of art itself, which testifies to this effectiveness of psychoanalytic storytelling. *Maus* is, without a doubt, an extraordinary artistic achievement. Yet the cost of this successful course of therapy for the son—and perhaps for us the public, who share his position—is still the humiliation of the father and the exposure of secrets that the father asked the son not to tell. Any psychoanalysis is going to bring up secrets, which is why confidentiality is a given in the psychoanalytic relationship. There may as well be rules that pertain to the patient's (as opposed to the analyst's) rights of free disclosure, especially if the secrets he or she has confessed aren't—and inevitably they cannot be—his or her own. Insofar as we all inherit one past or another, the question is again public as much as private and personal.

For all of us are victims of what Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok describe as *cryptment*, in which what are repressed within the self aren't simply one's own traumatized experiences but the unconsciously inherited secret traumas and repressions of others. "What haunts are not the dead," writes Abraham, "but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others," "the tombs of others." "Thus, the phantom cannot even be recognized by the subject" since it is

the formation of the unconscious that has never been conscious—for good reason. It passes . . . from the parent's unconscious into the child's. . . . The phantom's periodic and compulsive return lies beyond the scope of symptom-formation in the sense of a return of the repressed; it works like a ventriloquist, like a stranger within the subject's own mental topography.<sup>9</sup>

In order to understand his own traumatized youth as the son of survivors, Artie must do more than witness himself. He must understand not only his experience of his father but what his father's behavior in that experience encodes—namely, his own experience of the Holocaust and, of course, everything else that constitutes the father's past. Even Holocaust survivors, Spiegelman reminds us again and again, are differentiated human beings with private psychosexual histories; they do not all act the way Vladek does (cf. 2:22), for better and for worse. And this is all to the good.

In many ways, Art's exploration of his father's pain and suffering serves to lessen our negative judgment of Vladek in the same way that it lessens the son's. Yet the problem of the indecorous disclosure of his father's pain and dysfunction remains and pertains to us as well. What is this demand of ours, so like the son's in the opening frames of the book, that the past, which couldn't even fix itself, now lend its hand to help us fix the present? How might we put ourselves in relation to the past as to genuinely listen to and acknowledge it without appropriating the past to our own purposes and designs?

As psychoanalytically informed historical narrative, *Maus* presents us with one sort of problem not so easily to be set aside. Despite its claims to the contrary, it is a fiction—cartoon art, to boot—and this fact raises additional and equally knotty issues, though it is its fictionalization of the events that finally leads the text at least partway out of the dilemma of exploitation to which the present's voyeuristic interest in the past inevitably leads us. In a study that already bears significant affinities with psychoanalytic thinking, Wolfgang Iser explains the necessity for writing fiction:

Staging in literature makes conceivable the extraordinary plasticity of human beings, who, precisely because they do not seem to have a determinable nature, can expand into an almost unlimited range of culture-bound patternings. The impossibility of being present to ourselves becomes our possibility to play ourselves out to a fullness that knows no bounds, because no matter how vast the range, none of the possibilities will “make us tick.”<sup>10</sup>

Yet there is a price to be paid for this realization of human possibility. According to Iser, “The act of fictionalizing is a crossing of boundaries. . . . [It is] an act of transgression.” In the case of historical events such as the Holocaust, we may have to think very sternly about what justifies such transgressive staging of the self. The problem of indecorous disclosure is hardly unrelated to the equally knotty problem of fictionalizing the historical past.

Toward the end of the second volume of *Maus*, Spiegelman reproduces a remarkable photograph of his father. Like the only other two photos that Spiegelman includes in the text, it serves to remind the reader that beneath the masks (which are occasionally represented as slightly ajar, revealing other masks or drawings beneath) and beneath the drawings (which also mask reality) is a real world, a world of actual, literal people and events and emotions. Whatever our imaginative use of them, these human beings exist, as surely as did the Jews, beyond and in defiance of the Nazi attempt to transform them into vermin and other creatures not human. This is as important a message of this text as any other and has everything to do with something I will not discuss here: Spiegelman's choice to represent his human beings as animals. This narrative move on Spiegelman's part forces us to acknowledge that, however they look to us and however we might want to raise the question of the human either in relation to the Jews or in relation to the Nazis, they are all human beings all the same. This is something we know and that we cannot simply pretend not to see.

Nonetheless, this photograph of Vladek, taken shortly after the war, is surely one of the oddest documents in the text.<sup>11</sup> It prompts us to inquire not only after Spiegelman's reasons for introducing it, as if in evidence of reality, but his father's reasons for having had the photograph taken in the first place. "I passed once a photo place what had a **camp** uniform—a new and clean one—to make **souvenir** photos" (2:134), Vladek explains to his son. And indeed, the photograph shows Vladek looking young, dashing, and very military in neatly starched concentration-camp garb.

Surely, the photo represents a typical response of victims and survivors: to enact their defiance of everything that has been done to them, to transform humiliation and filth and their disease-ridden incarceration and dehumanization into their opposites. Vladek, of his own free will, dons his prison uniform and makes himself into the hero of his story, the commander of his own destiny. Of course, what determines Vladek's choice of costuming is the coercion he is now compelled eternally to resist. In imitation of his numerous repetitive, compulsive behaviors and the images of his riding endlessly nowhere on his exercycle, the photo freezes Vladek permanently in that position of the individual who can never free himself from the trauma through which he now asserts his very identity and whose every

behavior bespeaks the suffering he can't quite get past. The photo is, we might say, a portrait of repression, in which we see what repression looks like from the outside. Indeed, insofar as the photo is embedded into the story of his life, we glimpse repression from within, from behind the eyes that look out at us blankly and without emotion from the photo.

The moment Vladek survived, his identity as survivor was issued retroactively to him, along with his camp uniform, and he will wear that identity for the rest of his life. Insofar as the souvenir photo is also modeled on a genre of such photos—in particular, of soldiers—we are made to feel the force of social convention as well: the images by which we would assert who we are are most often issued by culture—in this case, a culture that would also deny to its members just that image of self it demands of them. Vladek's freedom consists only in his being his own captor; and he will remain free only so long as he can maintain this pose. Art(ie)'s reproduction of the photograph in his text makes this point about Vladek and in so doing, suggests something of how his own text both extends and, by confessing its fictionality and its self-interestedness, finally modifies the problem of documentary evidence.

Accompanying the reproduction of the photo is a drawing of Anya receiving the photo and, or perhaps as, the news of Vladek's survival: "And here's a picture of him!" she says. "My God—Vladek is really alive." Anya immediately grasps what is surely also part of Vladek's motivation in having the photo taken: the photo evidences the unbelievable fact of his having survived. Here I am, the photo announces, alive and well, a heroic survivor. (This may be a reason for many such souvenir photos of military personnel: it asserts their survival in the face of what is their possible imminent death.) Thus, the photo is a paradigm of witness testimony. It documents or evidences the historical events that, having transpired, bear witness to Vladek himself as much as to his family of his own harrowing experience. Presumably, Spiegelman's inclusion of the photo serves a similar purpose vis-à-vis the reader. Like the tape recordings of his father, the photograph constitutes documentary witness testimony.

But what the photo actually evidences, in both Vladek's and Art(ie)'s use of it, is really something quite different. In troubling ways, the photograph aligns itself with the world of Mickey Mouse fantasy. Though Mickey Mouse seems a more

recent foible of culture, with which Vladek somewhat dismissively confuses his son's own craft (1:133), Spiegelman indicates in the epitaph to volume 2 that it is already in Nazi propaganda a despised object of fantasy and make-believe, inextricably linked with both America and the Jews. The souvenir photo evidences Vladek's own indulgence in—but also the real possibility of—happy endings of the kind that Vladek articulates even less guardedly in the final frames of the novel and that Art is himself producing.

In one dimension of its being, and wholly in keeping with the idea of manufactured fantasy images of reality, the photo makes a lie of every detail of the story that Vladek has just narrated and his son has transcribed. It erases, sweeps away, and cleans up the horror, degradation, filth, and suffering that has been depicted frame after narrative frame of the book. If there is any full-fledged condemnation of the fictionalizing imagination, and thereby of the book itself by itself, this photograph would seem to be it. Yet the situation is hardly so simple. One is reminded here of James Young's idea that not only is testimony, like all historical narrative, constructed by the same rules of rhetoric that threaten the presumed veracity and factuality of the text that the witness-author would most like to preserve, but that the sheer fact of the text's textuality—we are dealing here with language and not artifact or some other form of directly tangible experience—undermines the author's desire that his or her words serve as irrefutable proof for the facts they cite, for words can prove nothing but their own existence.<sup>12</sup> Witness testimony, Lawrence Langer independently attests, is as constructed and prone to fictionalization as the fictions it would presumably keep at bay.<sup>13</sup>

Having produced a cartoon version of one of history's most appalling human chapters, in which the fictionalizing imagination of the artist repeatedly confesses in many ways its self-serving and fantasy motivations in telling the story of the past, Spiegelman produces the artifact itself: the father's narrative in the father's own language, unprocessed by the son except, of course, by its placement in the text. It is the height of fictionality and proves nothing at all. Equally important, it is as subjective and psychologically slanted as any tale the son tells, whether in his voice or his father's.

Yet, just as the mouse images force us to recognize that however we wish to think otherwise we are dealing here with human beings involved in human events,

so the photograph's invalidation of the possibility of documentary evidence compels us to acknowledge that indeed, the historical events the photo would call into question did occur. We know this despite the impotence of language or artifact to *prove* beyond a shadow of a doubt anything at all. This is one thing that fiction teaches us: the difference, to use Stanley Cavell's terminologies, between knowing and acknowledging, between accepting that we know things that cannot be proved and disowning the knowledge we thus possess.<sup>14</sup> Fiction makes explicit what documentary writing tends to conceal: the impossibility of proving and therefore the necessity of nonetheless acknowledging the events of the past.

But fiction does even more than this. Forging the link between psychoanalytic insights and literary theory, Geoffrey Hartman puts it this way: "memory, and especially the memory that goes into storytelling, becomes the agency by which primary trauma is overcome without producing secondary trauma in its wake. . . . Memory . . . limits and enables at the same time." For Hartman, this mediating and distancing function of memory is what literary language, *qua* language, achieves. Even while producing the eventfulness in which reader and writer mutually experience the events being depicted by the words, literary language produces estrangement and defamiliarization. It places a barrier between the writer and the reader that preserves the difference between primary and secondary trauma, between the realness or actuality (in its horribleness) of the one experience and the unrealness and distant, distinctive, fictiveness, of the other:

[A] massive realism which has no regard for representational restraint, and in which depth of illusion is not balanced by depth of reflection, not only desensitizes but produces the opposite of what is intended: an *unreality effect* that fatally undermines realism's claim to depict reality. . . . [A]rt creates an unreality effect in a way that is *not* alienating or desensitizing. . . . [I]t provides something of a safe-house for emotion and empathy. The tears we shed . . . are an acknowledgment and not an exploitation of the past.<sup>15</sup>

Fictionality, in other words, enables a certain relationship to the past that exactly preserves the difference between then and now. What the contextualized

photograph of Vladek enables us to see is the fictionality of culture and the face that culture always wears, even in the present moment of its becoming history, which is the mask behind which all of us hide our deepest fears and suffering. The photograph of the dashing young man pictures extraordinary anguish, brought under almost military control and sent with bravado in evidence of the “happy happy ending” in which this young man desperately wishes to believe. At the same time, the photograph evidences that such happy endings do occur, however compromised and painful they are. Despite his son’s—and our own—apparent cynicism concerning this happy ending and despite the act of repression the photograph evidences, Vladek isn’t entirely wrong about this happy ending. In defiance of Nazism’s intentions to the contrary (and it is the Nazi regime, we must remember, that is so dismissive of Mickey Mouse), he is reunited with Anya, they do go off to begin new lives in the United States, and they do have another child: the artist who is telling us their story. Who is to say for someone else what constitutes his or her happy ending? Or how much repression it is permissible for a happy ending to incorporate before it becomes madness or hallucination? By the strange perverted logic produced by the Holocaust, even to be united in death or to have a tombstone (imagine: a tombstone shared with one’s beloved) is, like survivorship itself, a new definition of what constitutes a happy ending.

For this reason, the final frames of the book repeat the gesture initiated in the photo (also repeated in the CD-ROMs of the book, which record Vladek’s voice): they give the story back to Vladek and let him write it his way. “More I don’t need to tell you,” he says to his son after he has described his reunion with Anya. “We were both very happy, and lived happy, happy ever after.” And he goes on in the next frame: “So . . . let’s stop, please, your tape recorder. . . . I’m **tired** from talking, Richieu, and it’s *enough* stories for now” (2:136). At the bottom of the page appears the picture of Vladek and Anya’s joint gravestone, bearing only a Jewish star and their names and dates, no epitaph, but with the artist’s signature and the date 1978–91 written across the page.

Wiping away the past with the words “happy happy ending” and restoring the dead son to life as he is about to join his wife in death, Vladek’s words seem to instance the very opposite of what they are claiming. One way, then, that we have of reading the story is to take the son’s signature as his parents’ epitaph, inscribing itself

onto their tombstone as a kind of trailing off of the family line. At the very beginning of volume two of *Maus*, Artie is represented as drawing with corpses piled up under his table. We might think that this tombstone looming large over the author's name is an even better picture of the way in which the past imposes itself on and buries the present. The dates 1978–91, appearing as they do on a graveyard setting and paralleling those on the stone, might just intimate that his life is coextensive with his writing of the text: he was born with the project of historical recovery, and he died with it, the story he was telling and being told not his story at all, but Richieu's. There is no happy happy ending for this son, who is as dead as the firstborn, and never, by some peculiar logic of his father's mind, even born. His picture they do not display in their bedroom. It is as if he doesn't exist.<sup>16</sup>

Yet might we not also read the end of the story in a second way, as indicating that what has been repressed and denied beneath consciousness is now consciously acknowledged and memorialized, placed on top? Art(ie)'s final gesture, also in imitation of reproducing the photograph, is simultaneously of release, of letting his father have the final word in his own words in his own way.<sup>17</sup> Like so much else in this text, the end admits of two diametrically antithetical readings, which is as useful a way as any of understanding our psychological lives, as expressed in the photo as well: we are never outside the traumas and narcissistic necessities that compel the contours of our lives, even as we transform those lives and make them always different from the conditions that produce them. Thus, while the writing of the story spans a certain time frame, the story itself spans a far different, and longer, set of dates; his story and theirs do not coincide. And Art's dates do *not* appear on a tombstone: they flow out of the vital script of his signature as he signs the text that is the story that flows out of theirs—a story that (as his device of a fictionalized narrative self within the text suggests) isn't even identical with his own life experience, let alone theirs. What succeeds his parents and their lives is this son and this story, which he now tells to us, and tells to more than us: for Art, in letting his father speak his final words to Richieu, also addresses his text to this same “ghost brother” (2:15) he has spent so much of his life resisting.

And to his daughter. By permitting his father's apostrophe to Richieu to stand, Art reminds us not only whose photograph it is that opens the volume, to whom the volume is dedicated, but also that other person to whom it is also dedicated: his newly born daughter, Vladek's granddaughter and Richieu's niece. In this way, Spiegelman incorporates into his already dual tale of father and son a double audience: though his parents' wholly understandable idealization of the lost child will until the end shadow Art(ie)'s own existence, making him forever not only the second child but the survivor child, Art comes to accept that the story that his father has told him (both in a lifetime of largely incomprehensible actions and now, finally, in far more comprehensible words) was being told simultaneously and perhaps even primarily to the other son as well. Just as Art's telling of his father's story attempts to force the father's story toward a present that doesn't interest Vladek in the least and that will likely never fully understand his story, so his father's desperate efforts have been to take his story back from the present moment of its composition to the dead son, to whom he owes at the very least this story, as all that remains for him to give him. At the end of the narrative, Art allows that his father's efforts have not been in vain. The narrative stands as the father's testimony to the dead son. At the same time, however, Art couples that address by his father to the past with his own address to the future: to his newly born (and yet-to-be born) children. For on the other side of the spectrality of the past—which cannot, for its lack of substance, be simply disbelieved and disregarded—is the equally unknowable, ungroundable future, which also cannot be denied. Between the two is perilously suspended the speaking voice of the present, mediating between the two.

What Spiegelman comes to in the final frames—which finally release his text, at least for a significant moment, from his own framing consciousness (indeed, the gravestone and the final inscription bear no frames: they exist outside and beyond the story they conclude)—is the final working through whereby he releases the past to tell its own story to those most likely to understand it: the other ghosts who inhabit the past together. In permitting his father his happy ending, in its painful denial and repression (of the son Artie as much as of anything else), Art also comes to see himself as part of his parents' happy ending, as that trailing (mouse) tail of a signature, so like the fairy-tale words *The End* affixed to many a Mickey Mouse/

Disney movie, also implies. The date 1991 is not (fortunately) the date of Art Spiegelman's death: it only marks the moment that this narrative ends and another begins, as one life subsequent to and continuing another.

Telling stories, writing fictions, is by no means an innocent activity. In some circumstances, it may even render violence to others and to the subjects that they and we hold dear. By the end of the narrative, Vladek is tired of storytelling; it is, he tells us, enough. The same might be said of his son, who bequeaths this text, as it is, with all its perturbations and perplexities and angers and fantasies, to the reader. But precisely because the text, in Dominick LaCapra's words, "does not offer total mastery but allows for the unsettling reinscription of trauma, [it] may enable the reader to see how the tensely interactive processes of acting-out and working-through might be engaged."<sup>18</sup> Fiction, in other words, helps us to see not truths or realities—whether of the past or of the present—but the processes and conditions by which we possess whatever knowledge of reality we possess. Fiction, in other words, doesn't solve or "fix" anything. Rather, like the psychoanalytic models it employs, which turn out to be nothing less than a theory of fiction making as well, it illuminates and enlightens. It renders consciousness conscious to itself and stages the human in all its manifold possibilities, including those that signal the very failure of human being to maintain itself as such. For this reason, it doesn't damage the success of Spiegelman's narrative that its author may still be accused at the end of having used his father's Holocaust narrative to his own psychological and artistic ends. The failure of the human is the large subject of all Holocaust writing, and no amount of seeing that will release any of us, writers or readers, from its awful condemnation of us all—of our greed, narcissism, and exploitativeness. Nonetheless, if we are at least partially to break the hold of the repetition of the same or the return of the repressed that seems to determine our lives in culture, it remains incumbent upon us, the readers of this text, to do nothing less than what the son has done for the father: to close the book and let go the impulse to see this speaking of the past as anything but the speaking of one ghostly voice to another, speaking purely and simply out of its pain and sorrow. For just as a photograph is but the two-dimensional outline or image of what we know to be a real-life person, so a written text is but the disembodied traces of an authentic human voice. Comic-book narrative is a rare combination of the two. There is always more to be seen and heard

than meets the eye and ear. We the readers are only the eyes and ears who can see and hear this text. Seeing and hearing we can thereby acknowledge, if we choose, the ghosts of past and present, other people's as well as our own.

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## NOTES

- 1 Art Spiegelman, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, vols. 1 and 2 (New York: Pantheon, 1991), 1:23; references hereafter in text.
- 2 On this necessity for historical validity, and the ways in which a text like *Maus* blurs the boundaries between history and fiction, see Sara R. Horowitz, *Voicing the Void: Muteness and Memory in Holocaust Fiction* (Albany: State University Press of New York, 1997), 2–13; see also Horowitz's discussion of the critical literature preceding hers on this issue, 17–20. On the comic-book format of the text, see Miles Orvell, "Writing Posthistorically: *Krazy Kat*, *Maus*, and the Contemporary Fiction Cartoon," *American Literary History* 4 (1992): 110–28; Hamida Bosmajian, "The Orphaned Voice in Art Spiegelman's *Maus* I & II," *Literature and Psychology* 44 (1998): 1–22; and Dominick LaCapra, "'Twas the Night Before Christmas: Art Spiegelman's *Maus*," in *History and Memory After Auschwitz* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 139–79.
- 3 Spiegelman wanted the text classified as "nonfiction"—see LaCapra's discussion of this in *History and Memory After Auschwitz*, 143–46.
- 4 My gratitude to David Roskies for pointing out to me these details.
- 5 For relevant definitions and discussions of trauma theory, see Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); and James Berger, *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 20–47.
- 6 LaCapra, *History and Memory After Auschwitz*, 40; *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 64–65.

- 7 LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz*, 177.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 153–54.
- 9 Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel*, ed. and trans. Nicholas R. Rand (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 171–74. See LaCapra’s discussion of encryption, *History and Memory after Auschwitz*, 154.
- 10 Wolfgang Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 3, 297.
- 11 Spiegelman himself on the CD calls the photo “troubling.”
- 12 James Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 24.
- 13 Lawrence Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).
- 14 Stanley Cavell, “Knowing and Acknowledging,” in *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969; reprint, 1976) and *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
- 15 Geoffrey Hartman, “Holocaust Testimony, Art, and Trauma,” in *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 156–58. For a like-minded comment, specifically in relation to *Maus*, see Adam Gopnik’s review in *The New Republic* 196 (1987): 31. Most of the criticism on *Maus* deals with its comic-book format as defamiliarizing in the way that Hartman is advocating. See, for example, Orvell, “Writing Posthistorically.”
- 16 For a reading of the ending as the refutation of Vladek’s happy ending, see Bosmajian, “The Orphaned Voice in Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*,” though Bosmajian also allows that Art’s handwritten signature suggests that the “artist and his orphaned voice are alive with all his crystalline ambiguities of interpersonal relationships and disastrous history” (21).
- 17 Spiegelman’s CD-ROM version of the text is intended to give his father, in the son’s words, “the last word.”
- 18 LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz*, 149.