

Postmodern Provocation: History and "Graphic" Literature

On the postmodern literary scene, the blurring of boundaries has long been a given. For years now, the border-crossing between high art and popular culture, in particular, has been both decried and celebrated'. For Andreas Huyssen, in *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*', it is in fact the erosion of the boundary between the elite and the popular that marks the move from the modern to the postmodern in twentieth-century culture. But generic borders are also losing their comforting defining power, as fiction, history, biography, autobiography, and other genres mix to create hybrid forms that, for some, simply recall the early days of the novel's formation! and, for others, foretell the death of the novel -once again. Yet another contentious characteristic of postmodernism has been its controversial relationship with history- that is. "history" understood as both the events of the past and the narratives that tell of them. For some, to challenge the accepted objectivity of historical accounts, pointing to their constructed nature, is tantamount to questioning the truth-value of historical narrative itself; to others, it is a welcome

1. The best known of the Adornian lamentations is likely that of Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991); one of the most convincing defenses and celebrations is that of Jim Collins, *Uncommon Cultures: Popular Culture and Postmodernism* (New York and London: Routledge, 1989).

2. (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1986).

3. See Lennard Davis, *Factual Fictions; The Origins of the English Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

acknowledgement of the narrativizing process in which all historians are engaged when they select, order, and narrate the events of the past. "Facts" deemed historical are perhaps more *made* than *found*.

Contemporary fiction has often been the site of challenge on all these fronts: from Carlos Fuentes to E.L. Doctorow, from Umberto Eco to Patrick Susskind, from Michael Ondaatje to Maxine Hong Kingston, novelists have been bringing the narratives of history (both personal and public) into dialogue with the conventions of fiction (both popular and "high art"). The case of Salman Rushdie is only an extreme version of the kind of ire that this transgressive border-crossing can evoke. Yet (and my choice of novelists to name above was not innocent), these are also among the best-selling or prize-winning writers of our postmodern times. This paradox cannot be easily dismissed by arguing that there can be no conflict between popularity and formal (or even thematic) innovation in a capitalist world where the new is privileged - and purchased. In order to explore more fully the complexity of this paradox, I want to look at a bestselling, Pulitzer Prize-winning work about the Holocaust, a work that not only has conjoined the visual and the verbal in a startling way, but has brought history, biography, and autobiography into the unlikely graphic space of the popular comic book: Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (I and II). Translated into over a dozen languages (including German"), *Maus* shows and tells the story of the "comix" artist, Spiegelman's attempt to show and tell the story of Vladek, his father. It is a story about the Nazi years in Poland, about the concentration camps, about death and survival. The reflexive presence of the narrating, drawing son frames both the father's tale and our reading/viewing of this historical allegory in which Jews are portrayed as mice and Germans, as cats",

4. In fact, parts of *Maus* were published in Germany before the American book appeared. See Art Spiegelman, *Breakdowns: Gesammelte Comic Strips*, Heinz Emigholz, trans., (Frankfurt: Roter Stern, 1980).

5. "Co-mix" is Spiegelman's term for the "co-mix of words and pictures" that is his art. This is cited in Margot Hornblower, "The Poet of Pictograms", *Time* 1 November 1993, p. 68.

6. Poles are pigs; Americans (because of their racial mongrelization and

Volume I of *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* is subtitled *My Father Bleeds History*⁷, and its epigraph sets up the animal allegory, citing Adolph Hitler's "The Jews are undoubtedly a race, but they are not human". Volume II, *And Here my Troubles Began*⁸, offers as its guiding epigraph a mid-1930s German newspaper article:

Mickey Mouse is the most miserable ideal ever revealed... Healthy emotions tell every independent young man and every honorable youth that the dirty and filth-covered vermin, the greatest bacteria carrier in the animal kingdom, cannot be the ideal type of animal... Away with Jewish brutalization of the people! Down with Mickey Mouse! Wear the Swastika Cross!

The governing conceit of *Maus* (underlined by the German title) is the horror that, just as mice could (and should) be exterminated as filthy, disease-carrying pests in the home or on the farm, so could the Jews be exterminated by the Nazis. In drawing Jews as mice, then, Spiegelman answers back to this cultural association, reappropriating and resignifying a negative image that once fuelled anti-Semitism, in part by showing precisely how such "mice" were made into the victims of sadistic Nazi "cats", When Jews "pass" as Christian Poles in *Maus*, they wear pig masks tied around their faces; those who pass less well, because of facial features, are shown with masks but also with visible mouse tails. More poignantly and painfully, Holocaust survivors who, because of the very fact of their survival, do not feel like "real" Jews, wear mouse masks.

This epigraph decrying Mickey Mouse, however, points to important historical connections not only between mice and Jews in the Nazi imagination but between *Maus* and the history of the mass culture form of the comic genre—with its animal creations from Krazy Kat to Donald Duck⁹. Like the comics, *Maus* too creates a fictive heterocosm, a complete visual and verbal universe. But

their reputation for friendliness) are dogs. In one reflexive passage, Spiegelman has somewhat more playful fun with other nationalities: the French are frogs, the Swedes reindeer, and a gypsy fortune teller is a (gypsy) moth.

7. (New York: Pantheon, 1973, 1980, 1981, 1982, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1986).

8. (New York: Pantheon, 1986, 1989, 1990, 1991).

9. On the tradition of Jewish comics, see Paul Buhle, "Of Mice and Menschen: Jewish Comics Come of Age", *Tikkun* (March-April 1992), pp. 9-16.

this one is not Superman's fictional Metropolis; instead, it is the terrifyingly real, historical world of World War II Europe, as narrated by the man who lived through it to the son who tries to capture its horror visually". When questioned as to whether comics could really offer a valid medium for dealing with the Holocaust, Spiegelman replied:

The language I speak is comics. I'm a rotten ballet dancer. So it would never be possible for me to make *Maus* as a ballet. There's something frightening about eliciting an aesthetic response built on so much suffering. The dangers have to be acknowledged while you are working. It's tricky. If you hear someone has taken on the genocide of the Jews in comics form, it sounds like a terrible idea. But using animals allows you to defamiliarize the events, to reinhabit them in a fresh way because they are coming at you in a language you are not used to hearing".

Even if readers do not automatically associate comics with children's reading and are aware of the complex history of comics in the United States - its history of avant-garde and underground transgression¹² as well as of capitalist cooption¹³ - the appropriateness of this mode for this particular topic can still be an issue, but it is an issue tackled head-on in the books themselves; the dangers are indeed "acknowledged" while Spiegelman is "working" on showing and telling this (hi)story.

When *Maus* was first published, it appeared on the *New York Times* best-seller lists under the category of fiction; Spiegelman requested that it be moved to the non-fiction list. In part, it was the comics format that motivated the initial categorization, no doubt.

10. This is not, in any conventional sense, a "posthistorical" world. See Miles Orvell, "Writing Posthistorically: *Krazy Kat*, *Maus*, and the Contemporary Fiction Cartoon", *American Literary History* 4 (1992), pp. 110-28.

11. Cited in Hornblower, p. 68.

12. Spiegelman is the co-founder of the new-wave comics, *Raw*. For more on the underground roots, see Spiegelman's comix tribute to *Mad* Magazine's cartoonist, Harvey Kurtzman, in the *New Yorker*, 29 March 1993, "H.K. (R.I.P.)".

13. See Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart, *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic*, David Kunzle, trans., (New York: International General, 1975, 1984).

But *Maus* often "reads like a novel" the way Maxine Hong Kingston's *A Woman Warrior* does: both are autobiographical and biographical narratives, but both possess the formal and linguistic structure and complexity (not to mention narrative contentions) usually associated with the novel genre. For instance, *Maus* presents dialogue (often to drawings of only character's heads) that constitutes fully developed and dramatic interaction, rather than the functionally staccato clichés of commercial comics'. *Maus* also reads like a novel because of its complicated dual narrative line. On the one hand, there is a familiar, sitcom" family situation of a difficult, aging father (Vladek) trying by many means, devious and fair, to get more attention from his son (Art)¹⁶, in whom filial guilt combats both longings for independence and long-held familial grudges (some connected to his mother's suicide"). On the other hand, there is the historical world of the Holocaust, through which the father lived and which the son wishes to write about-and draw.

Fictionalized dialogues, memory, confession, therapeutic narrative, testimonial, obituary, biography, autobiography, history: all these different modes jostle together self-reflexively in the postmodern space opened up by the mass-market, popular form of the comic book. The second chapter of *Maus II* marks the point in the narrative at which Spiegelman finally has to draw and tell the story of Auschwitz, the unrepresentable, the unspeakable site of the horror endured by his family, but not himself (for he was born after the war). The chapter opens with Art at his drawing table, wearing the mouse mask of his insecurity and survivor-guilt, and telling of his father's death in 1982 from congestive heart failure!". Noting

14. In this, *Maus* follows in the footsteps of some of the autobiographical comics work of Harvey Pekar and Robert Crumb.

15. Ethan Mordden, in "Kat and Maus", *New Yorker*, 6 April 1992, calls it "a sitcom containing a horror thriller" (p. 91).

16. I will be referring to the "character" here as Art, and the actual artist/writer as Spiegelman.

17. On the absent mother, see Marianne Hirsch, "Family Pictures: *Maus*, Mourning, and Post-Memory", *Discourse* 15.20992-1993), pp. 3-29.

18. *Maus II*, p. 41.

that "time flies"! ", Art juxtaposes dates from his father's and his own life-dates marking Vladek's horror and dates marking Art's success. During this recitation, he shows himself sitting atop a pile of Auschwitz corpses: the success of *Maus I* (to which he refers) was built on their suffering. As television interviewers, wearing masks of dogs, cats, and mice (American, German, Israeli), badger him with questions about the book and his intentions, Art's figure grows smaller and smaller, thus visualizing and symbolizing his regression to a child-like state (and perhaps his resistance to the fact that he is about to become a father himself soon). In order to deal with this conflict, Art goes to visit his psychiatrist, a Holocaust survivor himself (and also wearing a mouse mask), whom he hopes will help him imagine what Auschwitz was like. Even more than a novelist, perhaps, a graphic artist has to imagine, and then actually visualize, before he can draw. But, as Holocaust scholars have argued, Auschwitz is precisely the unimaginable and the unrepresentable"; And yet, it is, in the end, both imagined and represented, in part so that it will be *remembered*. Because of (rather than in spite of) the defamiliarization and distancing of the animal allegory, the horror is still powerful; the senseless has not been given sense.

Part of the horror of this narrative comes from its specificity: this is not the story of the Holocaust as a past historical event, an authoritative metanarrative of the Nazi genocide; it is one man's story – as later told to (and then by) his son. (While we have Vladek's taped words, the images are Spiegelman's.) Doubly mediated- by memory and by translation into a visual allegory- this is a true story, but a local, individual, particular true story. In the narrative, there is a very real tension between what we see and hear and what we believe: we see and hear Vladek as a difficult, nagging, and irritable aging man, using emotional blackmail on his son, being maddeningly unreasonable with his second wife; yet we trust this unreliable man to be a reliable witness and a reliable narrator of his own story. We "hear" his accented vernacular English (from Spiegel-

19. And we see the literal "flies" of time buzzing around the frames and into the gutters- yet another border that Spiegelman crosses.

20. The most well-known articulation of the view of the Holocaust as a radical rupture in Western history and, thus, in its representational practices is

man's tapes)": we "hear" and "see" his kindness and bravery, even amid the horror of his experience in the death camps (as Spiegelman draws the story told to him). But we also "see" and "hear" a manipulative, stingy elderly man who drives his son to worry that, in the name of realism, he will paradoxically risk stereotyping his father: "IN SOME WAYS HE'S JUST LIKE THE RACIST CARICATURE OF THE MISERLY OLD JEW" -a remark, however, that provokes Vladek's wife to say: "HAH! YOU CAN SAY THAT AGAIN". Here, history literally becomes Lenin's "who does what to whom" - not only in the past, but in the present, for all is mediated by the listening, drawing son. We watch Spiegelman foreground Art's own role in wanting to recount his father's tale, his own insecurities, his biases, neuroses, and fears. Just as there is no single, consistent Vladek, so there is no single, authoritative History offered in *Maus*; it contains, instead, several histories, each simultaneously authorized and put into question. It is one man's attempt to understand (in the present) the experience of one other man (in the past). What makes this such a difficult process, one to which Spiegelman constantly calls attention, is the combination of the private (it is his own father about whom he is writing) and the public (it is the horror and brutality of the camps that he is showing). The personal and unsentimentalized father-son interaction is as much part of the emotional core of the work as is the cat-mouse historical allegory".

For all its allegorical distancing, *Maus* is a strangely realist narrative. Yet, however documentary or realist its mode (the text is

Theodor Adorno's in *Negative Dialectics*, E. B. Ashton, trans., (New York: Continuum, 1973), pp. 360-65.

21. Though, when the scene shifts to the past, the accent disappears: convention would have it that he is speaking perfectly his native tongue, even if we read it in English. On Spiegelman's reconstruction of a more marked dialect than Vladek actually possessed, see Michael Rothber "'We Were Talking Jewish': Art Spiegelman's *Maus* as 'Holocaust' Production", *Contemporary Literature* 35.4 (Winter 1994), pp. 670-74 especially.

22. See Alice Yaeger Kaplan's "Theweleit and Spiegelman: Of Men and Mice", in *Remaking History*, Barbara Kruger and Phil Mariani, eds., (Seattle: Bay Press, 1989), which ends with "In Spiegelman, the form-the radical comic strip-brings into the cultural mainstream of the eighties a sixties militancy, with its hallucinogenic imperative to transform our parents' dusty reality. By using that radical form to tell his father's story, Spiegelman consecrates it with his own

taken from actual tape recordings)", it always reminds us of the *lack* of transparency of both its verbal and visual media. Its consistent reflexivity, pointing to the utter non-objectivity of the historian or biographer, here raises precisely the issues that have obsessed theorists of historiography for several decades now. Far from being ahistorical because of their challenges to some of the assumptions grounding traditional historiography, self-conscious narratives like *Maus* enact critical commentaries on the very "making" of history, from its "narrativizing" to the nature of its documentary archive. Problematizing notions of teleology as well as objectivity, of causality as well as totality, *Maus's* double narrative line simultaneously asserts the validity of the testimonial and questions the reliability of representation; it accepts both the truth and the vagaries of memory. To write history (personal and public) as a reflexive comic book is not to say history is a fiction; it is, instead, to suggest that all accounts of that history are necessarily "narrativized" accounts, to use Hayden White's term, once again. Here they are doubly textualized versions, doubly mediated by time and narrative modality (both verbal and visual). Their archival sources -tape-recorded remembrances, documents- are selected and ordered, interpreted and "emplotted" in an explanatory narrative, given meaning as "facts"? Historical facts-even about the Nazi genocide- are constructed, not found; documents do not possess their own meaning, but are given meaning by historians". This process is both underscored and ironized by Spiegelman. At

vision and voice" and claims his parentage in order to free himself from its bonds (p.171).

23. The interactive CD-ROM version of *The Complete Maus*, which allows auditory access to these tapes (and, visually, to archival photos, prisoner drawings, earlier sketches, etc.), increases the realist dimensions considerably, as did the 1992 Museum of Modern Art exhibit in New York about the making of *Maus* (which played the actual tapes).

24. See Hayden White, "The Narrativization of Real Events", *Critical Inquiry* 7.4 (1981), pp. 793-8.

25. See Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality" *Critical Inquiry* 7.1 (1980), pp. 5-27; "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory", *History and Theory* 23.1 (1984), pp. 1-33; and Dominick LaCapra, *History and Criticism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985).

26. See James E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and*

the end of *Maus II*, Art reproduces an actual photograph of Vladek in a concentration camp uniform. The seeming incontestable truth-value of such documentary evidence, however, is immediately undermined by the accompanying narration of how the photo was obtained. Vladek explains: "I PASSED ONCE A PHOTO PLACE WHAT HAD A CAMP UNIFORM -A NEW AND CLEAN ONE - TO MAKE SOUVENIR PHOTOS..."²⁷

If, as Benveniste²⁸ suggested, "history" suppresses the direct, discursive "I/you" of the enunciative situation in favour of the "it" of impersonal narration (in which events appear to narrate themselves), *Maus* re-foregrounds the "discourse" of the various "I"s Art, Vladek, and others - and their different conditions and situations of enunciation. It does so in order to ask not only "what happened in the past?" but "how do we know what happened?" The ontological and the epistemological are therefore of equal concern: "the past did exist, the Holocaust did happen, but *Maus* explores *how* we know that, as well as *what* we can know about it from one man's testimony and one man's suffering. There are no universal claims to truth here, but this does not mean that no truth exists. Christopher Noms has attacked the postmodern for effacing "all sense of the difference between truth and falsehood, reality and illusion, serious and non-serious discourse"²⁹. And, indeed, at first blush, *Maus* - the comic book that frames a Holocaust narrative in a Jewish sitcom - might seem to be guilty of just such an effacement. But, I would prefer to argue the contrary: the art of pointing to the complexity and the difficulty of telling truth from falsehood, reality from illusion, serious from non-serious discourse may well be the more truthful, real, and serious task. *Maus* asks difficult questions. What is the truth-claim of the documentary here? Is Vladek's testimony - told for his son, whom he is always

the Consequences Of Interpretation (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

27. *Maus II*, p. 143.

28. Emile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, Mary Elizabeth Meeks, trans., (Coral Gables, Fla: University of Miami Press, 1971).

29. Cf. Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London and New York: Methuen, 1987).

30. *What's Wrong with Postmodernism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1990), p. 2.

complaining about and manipulating- a stand-in for the past, a substitute for it? Or is it a re-textualization of an already textualized (because remembered) past, a re-emplotting by the son of the father's emplotted story? History, biography, autobiography -no less than fiction- are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems.

Whichever of these terms our particular theoretical bent leads us to prefer, *Maus* never lets us forget that it is the story of a story of history, a textualization of a textualization of very real suffering. The startling difference between the voice of the querulous older Vladek talking to his son and the calm, considered tone of the same man recounting the horrors of the Holocaust and his own quiet courage is a difference that signals not only protective distancing but also the process of narrativizing. Spiegelman obviously wasn't present at all the scenes he presents verbally and visually in *Maus*; nor was Vladek. Like Oliver Stone's films about J.F.K. or Nixon, *Maus* fictionalizes as it narrativizes, imagines as it recounts actual, remembered events. "Literature" and "history" are not separate or separable categories of discourse today (if ever they were), and it is hybrid works like *Maus* that have shown the creative possibilities of cross-border activity between not only high and mass culture but also seemingly different genres of discourse. History, like literature, is presented instead as the site of what Donna Haraway calls "situated knowledge" -where we can talk about things like the "politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situation, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims'?. Vladek's story is partial, not universal; so too is Spiegelman's. But *Maus*'s reflexive admission of contingency has not stopped either story from having an impact on readers throughout the world - keeping history in memory through memory and its telling.

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31. *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 195.

Post-Modern Literature. Understanding Post-modernism. Until the 1920s, the term "modern" used to mean new or contemporary, but thereafter it came to be used for a particular period, the one between the two World Wars (1914-1945). Then came up after about half a century the, magic term, "post-modern," meaning the period after the modern. Now, this sort of naming is certainly problematic. For how many "post" will have to be used for the further periods of literary history to follow? Extensive and varied debates about postmodernism in philosophy and cultural theory notwithstanding, we can concentrate upon the key theorists whose ideas have shaped these debates about the philosophical effects and theoretical impact of the movement after modernism.