

# Introduction

## *The Idea of Fiction*

I remember at one time  
 poets used to "poeticize"  
 it is still possible to write verses  
 it is also possible to do many other  
 things

—Tadeusz Rozewics

Although it claims a vast and growing readership, Holocaust fiction goes against the grain. In the ongoing critical discourse about the Holocaust and its representation, the status of imaginative literature as a serious venue for reflections about historical events comes repeatedly under question. Holocaust fiction is seen by many readers as—at best—a weaker, softer kind of testimony when compared to the rigors of history, or—at worst—a misleading, dangerous confusion of verisimilitude with reality. Louis Begley, in reflecting on the connection of his novels to his personal experience as a child survivor, succinctly articulates what many readers find most problematic about the idea of Holocaust fiction: "To separate what is true from what is not would be like trying to unscramble an omelet" (Fein C10). But the word "fiction" as a synonym for "lies" poses it antithetically to truth and reflects negatively on the expressive possibilities of a particular literary form when applied to the world of actual events.

The present study presumes fiction as a serious vehicle for thinking about the Holocaust. The trope of muteness, predominant in Holocaust narratives of all sorts, functions in fiction deliberately and explicitly to

raise and explore connections and disjunctures among fictional constructs, textual omissions, and historical events. Writers of Holocaust-centered fiction, like Begley, speak enigmatically of the fictionality of their work, simultaneously resisting and embracing this generic categorization. While diminishing the historical authority of their work, fictionality frees them from adhering to a certain kind of exactitude or fidelity, in order to attain a different kind of exactitude. The complexities of Holocaust fiction figure importantly not only in the critical discourse about the Holocaust but also within the fictional works themselves. The unravelling of these considerations are central to my exploration of muteness.

In a letter to the *New York Times Book Review*, Art Spiegelman takes great pains to insist that his cartoon opus, *Maus I* and *II*, not be classified as “fiction” on the *Times* “best seller” list: “to the extent that ‘fiction’ indicates that a work isn’t factual, I feel a bit queasy.” Originally serialized in successive issues of *RAW*, an avant garde commix magazine edited by Spiegelman and his wife, Françoise Mouly, *Maus* utilizes humanoid animals to depict the life and times of Vladek Spiegelman, Art’s father and a survivor of Auschwitz. Two separate but intertwined narratives unfold: Vladek’s story of suffering and survival in the past and Art’s story of his troubled relationship with Vladek in the present, which, by the end of *Maus*, also becomes past.

Spiegelman’s Holocaust book blurs the boundaries of genre in multiple ways. The commix format mixes narrative with graphic representation in the progression of line-drawn panels, utilizing a medium Spiegelman describes as “without pretensions to art”<sup>1</sup> (Dreifus 34), to enact a “modest” genre of Holocaust art, born of history, remembrance, and comic strip drawings. Graphically, *Maus* alternatively presents itself, on the one hand, as transparent vehicle for representing the past, replete with diagrams of hideouts and detailed sketches of barracks and bunkers and, on the other hand, as self-consciously contrived artifice, with self-referential depictions of Art in the act of drawing.

In addition, within the parameters of the commix, *Maus* shifts ground constantly between biography and autobiography: Vladek’s autobiography, Art’s biography of his father, Art’s autobiography, the father’s and the son’s biographies of Vladek’s wife Anja. As Vladek’s autobiography, *Maus* depicts the survivor speaking his remembrances into a tape recorder, whose transcript the son faithfully reproduces in the vehicle of the comic strip. As Art’s biography of Vladek, *Maus* repeatedly represents the son’s agonizing over the aesthetically and ethically appropriate ways to represent his father, the Nazi genocide, and the historical and contemporary milieux. As Art’s autobiography, *Maus* interposes

the constant presence of the tape recorder mediating between father and son, an emblem of the Holocaust memories that come between them and also constitute the plane of their relationship. As Anja's biography, *Maus* offers spare and fragmentary traces of her life in conversations between her husband and son, whose remembrances clearly shape and perhaps distort her representation. Absent but repeatedly evoked are Anja's missing journals, represented as straightforward memoirs written with the intent of informing her son about her life.

Fidelity to his father's personal history and careful and exhaustive research into the visual aspects of camp topography and shelters (including archival photographs and sketches by Holocaust victims and survivors)<sup>2</sup> clearly indicate that Art Spiegelman saw his role at least in part as Vladek Spiegelman's biographer, not as a roman-à-clef graphic novelist. "As an author I believe I might have lopped several years off the 13 I devoted to my two-volume project if I could only have taken a novelist's license while searching for a novelistic structure." Spiegelman's protest to the *New York Times* claims a neat distinction between invention ("a novelist's license"), not factually reliable, and artistry ("a novelistic structure"), pressed into service of facts.

The artistry of Spiegelman's work rests not only on the dramatization of Vladek's history but on a contemplation of the conditions of its writing/drawing. The self-conscious portrayal within the comic of the cartoonist himself, at once author, narrator, and character—depicted in the act of gathering information, transmuted into the text and graphics now in the hands of the reader—signals to us that Spiegelman is no naive raconteur. Instead, an awareness of the complexities of memory, narrative, trauma, representation, and perspective informs the work. Indeed, *Maus* repeatedly lets us know that what we read is not objective historical record but Vladek's story, his experiences and recollections. The words of Art's mother, Anja, are pointedly missing; after her suicide, Vladek burned the journals she had written in the hope that someday her son "will be interested by this." Moreover, other survivors in *Maus* have different memories. Spiegelman's narration permits us to contemplate the way that Vladek's story takes shape: not in some "pure" unmediated realm, but in the space between two people, the teller and the listener, a father and a son. *Maus* takes shape as much because Art wants to listen as because Vladek wishes to speak; it thereby takes in the contours of their complicated filial relationship.<sup>3</sup>

The space of the told story is framed by untold stories: Anja's stories, missing entirely except through the prisms of her husband's and her son's memories. In Art's recollection, Anja's love smothers and her suicide wounds. In Vladek's recollection, Anja appears weak and depen-

dent. He repeatedly saves her sanity and life both before and during the war. Anja's muteness in *Maus* (and, presumably, in the life of the author) is thus triply reinforced: by her suicide, by the experiential and emotional gulf separating her from her son while alive, and by the postmortem destruction of her journals. Alongside Vladek's apparently open and unimpeded testimony is Anja's absent narrative. Her radical muteness undershadows Vladek's loquaciousness, reminding the reader that for every survivor's story that is spoken and heard, another's remains unvoiced, forever lost. Thus, Vladek's told and Anja's untold stories are companion pieces, whose unsettling symmetry is underscored by Art's final accusation to each parent in *Maus I*: "Murderer" (159) to Vladek; "You *murdered* me, Mommy" (103), to Anja.

If death radically and irretrievably truncates Anja's narrative, Vladek's is curtailed no less abruptly. Vladek's story of atrocity and survival ends with an account of his reunion with his beloved Anja, not long after liberation. "We were both very happy, and lived happy, happy ever after," he tells his son and then immediately asks him to stop the tape recorder. Deliberately cut off from Vladek's account is everything that happens next: Anja's suicide, his own incessant nightmares, the destruction of her memoirs. Then, as though to counter his imposed happy ending, his denial of continued loss, he calls Art by the name of his firstborn son, Richieu, murdered in childhood by the Nazis. Thus, beneath the chronological account that Vladek tells Art, and that Art depicts and retells, remains an unspoken past—unspoken, perhaps, because it is not past but still jarringly alive for Vladek. The omnipresent tape recorder, mediating between Art and Vladek, Art and his artistry, Art and the reader, accompanies the telling from beginning to end. Vladek's past becomes testimony by virtue of being spoken, heard, recorded, retold. Art bears witness for the witness. In this context, Vladek's switching off the tape recorder is particularly significant. It marks the end of the movement by which experience becomes testimony; it marks also the boundaries of testimony—events, emotions, and memories that, shrouded in muteness, are unavailable for testimony, at least directly. Anja's destroyed notebooks are the cognitive and psychological equivalent of Vladek's termination of the recording sessions. Art Spiegelman's artistry resides in making these absences felt, their resonances recognized if not understood.

While Spiegelman deliberately pushes against generic conventions in *Maus*, his letter to the *New York Times* clearly indicates one boundary whose blurring he resists. At least for the purposes of the *Times*'s rudimentary categorization, Spiegelman insists that history be

neatly and conclusively marked off from the unreliable “fiction.” In the *Times* letter, Spiegelman distinguishes between artistry, something he deems acceptable within the parameters of a true account, and fiction, something antithetical to truth, set unambiguously outside the pale of history. “If your list were divided into *literature* and *nonliterature*, I could gracefully accept the complement,” he writes [emphasis mine]. Literature implies a serious aesthetic project, not necessarily a fiction. Spiegelman willingly acknowledges a seriousness of purpose and a measure of aesthetic success: “perhaps if there can be not art about the Holocaust, then there may at least be comic strips” (Dreifus 34).

What are the connections between lies and fiction, and between the lies of fiction and the truths of testimony? In discussing the constructed nature of autobiography, Barrett Mandel notes, “Language creates illusions that tell the truth . . . language constantly makes the discovery of truth possible because all language is rooted in human being and culture, so that even lies are anchored in being and contain the possibility of their own revelation” (63). Art Spiegelman’s insistence on the nonfictionality of *Maus* rests on several points: that the events of the Shoah can be adequately represented in language and graphics, that they can be successfully transmitted to those not part of the Nazi genocide, and that the artifice of animation notwithstanding, *Maus* tells a truthful story. Strategies of narration and transmission (“a novelistic structure”) do not impinge on the truthfulness of testimony.

Spiegelman correctly assumes that his choice to depict various categories of people as cartoon animals is responsible for the *Times*’s categorizing his work as “fiction.” In fact, Spiegelman’s graphic choices amplify the verbal narration, providing a constant reminder of the politics of genocide, the powerfulness of some, the helplessness of others, beyond the vagaries of individual personalities and perceptions. For Spiegelman, the iconographic choices—depicting Jews as mice and Germans as cats, for example—indicate the implied limits of representation, disallowing an interpretation that construes Germans as victims rather than perpetrators. The complexities of trauma and memory, too, may be adequately integrated into the fabric of testimony, as Spiegelman depicts the lasting effects of victimization on his father many years later. Some of Vladek’s most annoying traits—misplaced wiliness, suspicion, manipulateness—may well have been factors in his and Anja’s survival. At the same time, Anja’s radical muteness and Vladek’s selective gaps denote the limits of representation and the consequences of trauma, at least for these survivors’ stories.

Thus, Spiegelman’s protest to the *Times* asserts a distinction between artistry and fictionality. Similarly, filmmaker Claude Lanz-

mann objects strenuously to references to his opus *Shoah* as a mere “esthetic” project whose truth claims might be diminished in discussions of cinematic techniques of the sublime. “How do you dare to talk about esthetic?” he demanded of a participant at a Yale University seminar (“Seminar” 97). At the same time, like Spiegelman, Lanzmann acknowledges the function of the artist’s eye and hand. *Shoah* witnesses the Jewish catastrophe not by reproducing reality but through carefully planned juxtapositions and staged segments; the film, Lanzmann asserts, is “not at all representational” (“Seminar” 97), not really documentary, “more of a novel than an essay” (Gussow C13). Critical reception of Lanzmann’s film affirms the alliance of “art” with history. *Shoah* has been described as “absolute proof that the historian is also an artist” (Vidal-Naquet 111), as “a work of art” (Felman 206) whose truth value surpasses those of feature films and docudramas, cinematic equivalents of literary fiction.<sup>4</sup>

Clearly both Spiegelman and Lanzmann have produced a work outside the conventional boundaries of both art and historical writing. Lanzmann’s film uses no archival footage from the Nazi era. Rather than exposition or off-camera commentary, the filmmaker allows his complex story to unfold through a montage of disparate and discontinuous interviews with willing and unwilling subjects, visual imagery, personal reflections, staged and spontaneous scenes. He develops, in essence, a filmic equivalent of Spiegelman’s *novelistic structure* in which “real” witness and participants “play themselves” (Gussow C13). Both Lanzmann’s and Spiegelman’s projects are “art,” then, not because they are products of the liberated imagination; both remain wedded to a testimonial commitment, an emplotment already “given,” if not yet known. Both works are termed “art” in that they are cognitively and emotionally effective and affecting, and make choices unconventional in traditional historical or biographical narratives. Like Spiegelman, Lanzmann relies not only on survivors who can fluently if painfully articulate their memories; he also recognizes and conveys the testimonial possibilities present in moments of muteness. Both artists intrude on their works; neither pretends to scientific objectivity of the disinterested researcher, yet both share and explicitly assert a commitment to truth. Neither for Spiegelman nor for Lanzmann does artistry soften or prettify the implications of the events they uncover and reveal; rather the artistry resides in the meshing of disparate fragments into a cognitive, psychological, and ethical whole that unsettles the viewer. In other words, the artistry is not merely an overlay on already known facts, but itself constitutes and interprets. Indeed, Lanzmann refers to his film as “pensée . . . thinking” (Gussow C15).<sup>5</sup>



Spiegelman's and Lanzmann's respective projects challenge the boundaries between art and history. Where these boundaries blur, they imply that one can think better or at least differently about the events of history. The point is not so much to learn the facts directly from the mouths of survivors as it is to break down the cognitive and emotional barriers that keep the past safely in the past for listeners, readers, and viewers. The Shoah is still present in Spiegelman's and in Lanzmann's representations—in the relationship between parents and children, or between living Poles and dead Jews, or between Holocaust survivors and exilic landscapes. Most importantly, both Spiegelman and Lanzmann structure their works so that the reader or viewer becomes not so much a listener to a story, a memory, but a witness to ongoing acts of remembering, of reliving.

Both artists, however, take great pains to distinguish their own work from fiction. Echoing Spiegelman, Lanzmann insists that “[t]he truth kills the possibility of fiction”.<sup>6</sup> One can imagine, of course, ways in which the softening of such categories as art, history, and fiction might be used to deny, falsify, or domesticate the events of the Nazi genocide.<sup>7</sup> (Indeed, sadly, one need not merely imagine.) As Spiegelman points out to the *New York Times*, “The borderland between fiction and nonfiction has been fertile territory for some of the most potent contemporary writing. . . . It's just that I shudder to think how David Duke . . . would respond to seeing a carefully researched work based closely on my father's memories of life in Hitler's Europe and in the death camps classified as fiction.” In a sense, however, when Spiegelman disputes the best seller list's classification, suggesting that the *Times* “consider adding a special ‘nonfiction: mice’ category to your list,” he is deliberately disingenuous to make clear that this story is not to be dismissed as invention.

Spiegelman's facetious solution to such “problems of taxonomy”—the creation of a new category, “mice”—underscores the inadequacy of conventional generic boundaries with regard to Holocaust testimony. Unable or unwilling to respond to the deeper issues that underlie Spiegelman's challenge with an open-ended exploration of such “problems of taxonomy,” the *Book Review* editor complies with Spiegelman's request, relying on prior institutions of classification for the cartoon book: “The publisher . . . lists it as ‘history, memoir.’ The Library of Congress also places it in the nonfiction category. . . . Accordingly, this week we have moved *Maus II* to the hard-cover nonfiction list. . . .”<sup>8</sup> The murky terrain between fiction and history remains untrammelled.

What Spiegelman calls a problem of “taxonomy” characterizes fictional representations of the Holocaust. Spiegelman's discomfort with

the categorization of his work as fiction marks a particular discomfort for writing about Auschwitz after Auschwitz, a discomfort that intrudes on all aesthetic projects but particularly those not developed by survivors themselves. The ongoing critical conversation about Holocaust writing probes the limitations and propriety of its aesthetic representations. Following Theodor Adorno, critical discourse interprets his much cited statement about the barbarism of poetry after Auschwitz to mean, variously, that one should not write lyric poetry, any poetry, any fiction, any "literature," or anything at all in wake of the Holocaust, unless or even if one is a survivor of the Nazi genocide. Broadly speaking, there is a high degree of discomfort with the idea of an aesthetic project built upon actual atrocity, as well as a proprietary sense of what belongs properly to the domain of the historian. Within these rough parameters, a special category emerges—that of *témoignages*, or witnessing—to contain survivor testimony of all sorts. For survivor writing, a literature of testimony develops that encompasses not only autobiography but fictional autobiography and imaginative literature, as well as poetry. The actual experiences of the writer, whether represented or transfigured in the work itself, anchor and validate the writing. The closer the writer to what Primo Levi refers to as "the bottom"—those murdered by Nazi genocidal practices—the more the work could be construed as itself being a part, a trace, a fragment of the atrocity or at any rate of the survivor's memory or psyche. Thus, while Jerzy Kosinski's novel *The Painted Bird* was controversial for its grotesque and possibly gratuitously violent depictions when it was first published, the purported confluence of the author's own childhood experiences and the novel's boy protagonist's fictional experiences helped to ensure the book a place in what has evolved into a "canon" of Holocaust writing.<sup>9</sup>

Like Spiegelman's faithfully rendered and imaginatively constructed commix, fiction of the Holocaust inhabits a space beyond conventional categories, mixing *témoignages* with invention. For example, Ida Fink's short story collection, *A Scrap of Time*, and her longer work, *The Journey*, are categorized by the Library of Congress as "fiction." Yet although the author does not dispute the category, she also asserts that the events described in both books "really happened."<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Louis Begley resists generically categorizing his autobiographically inspired novels, *Wartime Lies* and *The Man Who Was Late*. Indeed, the title of Begley's first novel, *Wartime Lies*, suggests the complexities of the issues. The "wartime" lies are the invented names and histories necessary to the survival of a young Jewish boy during the years of the Nazi genocide. Moreover, they refer also to the unmaking and remaking of the self—the internalization of the lies, the erasure of true



and assumption of false identities—resulting from that struggle to survive, and finally to the novel itself, a “lie” (or a fiction) about a childhood (and the loss of childhood) during the war. Ultimately, the novel challenges the conventional understanding of truths and lies. The novel disrupts the conventional ethical evaluation of lies as evil and truth as good; in the context of the Holocaust, the truth could cost a survivor his life. Some lies (such as those Begley’s boy lives out) become themselves the truths of one’s existence; some events become knowable through their fictions.

The novel charts a young, Jewish boy’s loss of voice, agency, and identity—the price exacted by survival—as it recounts the experiences of Maciek, whose first-person account comprises most of the narrative. Under the guardianship of his aunt Tania, Maciek survives the war by assuming and shedding a series of false identities and histories. Intermittently, an unnamed adult narrator intrudes to comment upon the action, human suffering and survival.

The Shoah disrupts and ultimately destroys Maciek’s childhood, ineluctably wiping his early years from memory. Before the war, the child has begun to transact “pacts” and “bargains” with the adults in his life. As Maciek begins to mature, his assertions of will, enacted through food, sleep, and toilet habits, evolve into linguistic negotiations. When the war propels his family into hiding, however, Maciek becomes utterly reliant upon Tania to survive. To keep their Jewish identity secret, Tania instructs him on how to speak, look, and move, and even which emotions to display and which sins to confess before taking holy communion. She drills him in German and rehearses him in a sequence of fabricated life histories. He learns to wipe out of his speech all traces of Jewishness. He accepts his aunt’s authority, repeats and obeys her instructions. In the sequence of boarding houses, cellars, and farms they inhabit, “One had to talk, one could not always talk about books, one had to be ready to talk about oneself. Which self? The issue was the limit of one’s inventiveness and memory, because the lies had to be consistent—more consistent, according to Tania, than the truth” (95). Reversing his prior movement toward independence, he learns to subsume his will to Tania’s, to substitute his voice for hers.

She said it was lucky we had not forgotten for a moment we were Catholic Poles. . . . We would make ourselves very small and inconspicuous, and we would be very careful not to get separated in the crowd. If something very bad happened and she was taken away, I wasn’t to try to follow: it wouldn’t help her and I might even make things worse for both of us.

If possible I should wait for her. Otherwise, I should take the hand of whatever grown-up near me had the nicest face, say I was an orphan, and hope for the best. I shouldn't say I was a Jew, or let myself be seen undressed if I could avoid it. She had me repeat these instructions and told me to go to sleep. (126)

The narrative presents Maciek as predominantly mute; when he does speak, his own voice is displaced by that of Tania or other adults. As bearer of Tania's ventriloquisms, Maciek is doubly mute, since Tania's voice, too, becomes the vehicle for others' desires. "Tania's speech and gestures . . . were never without purpose. That purpose was to conceal and please, to concentrate attention on what might gratify the listener and deflect it from us. I played the supporting role" (154). Thus, Maciek and Tania do not merely tell wartime lies; they surrender the agency of voice in order to become, for others, desired objects. For Maciek, less skillful than his aunt, the strategy calls down the condemnation of others, who see in his speech acts evidence of "weak character . . . my habit of insinuating flattery. . . always to be trying to make oneself liked . . ." (96); his "habit of smiling when there was nothing to smile about. . . had to be because I was a little hypocrite" (100). Taken together, Maciek's clumsy and Tania's more polished performances underscore the loss of voice and erasure of identity of the Shoah victim, as substitution for or as prelude to the radical silence of death.

These voices are extinguished solely because they are Jewish voices. In expunging all traces of identity from Maciek's speech, Tania insists on only one linguistic shard of Jewishness:

. . . she would teach me what every Jew must do when his death is near: cover his head, with only his hands if necessary, and say in a loud voice, *Shema Yisrael, Adonai elocheinu, Adonai echad*. Hear, O Israel, the Lord thy God, the Lord is one. That was a way for a Jew not to die alone, to join his death to all those that had come before and were still to come. (71)

In Tania's rendition as recollected by the narrator, both the transliteration of the original Hebrew verse and its translation into English contain an error in the words *eloheinu*, "our God"; in the narrator's translation "our God" becomes "thy God," underscoring Maciek's separation and alienation from Jews, from Judaism, and from his Jewish self.

Only as a non-Jew may the boy live; he can, however, die into Jewishness. That one regains Jewish voice and language only at the point of death, the ultimate extinction of voice, underscores the narra-

tive's network of symbolic associations. The narrative symbolically conflates darkness and muteness with Dante's hell, "that place mute of all light . . ." (68), symbolically linking voicelessness with hopelessness, moral emptiness, anguish, and death, and light with life, voice, truth, and agency.

Enforced muteness represents both the source of trauma—for Maciek, the Shoah itself—and, at the same time, the lasting effect of trauma for the adult who was the child Maciek (but no longer goes by that name). Ostensibly narrated in the first person by the child himself, the narrative turns out to be only the most recent in an ongoing sequence of ventriloquisms, this time of the adult survivor who displaces onto the mute child an imagined childhood: "our man has no childhood that he can bear to remember; he has had to invent one" (181). Like Tania's voice, however, the survivor's voice doubly affirms Maciek's muteness.<sup>11</sup> For while the adult appropriates the narrating "I" of the child's autobiographical narrative, in actuality the child's muteness extends into his adult life. For the novel opens and closes with a man who also has no voice. Like the child, this man constitutes a witness only in the limited sense that he sees, he has seen, and he understands—but he does not bear witness. His profession indeterminately described as one who teaches "how to compare one literature with another" or "a literary agent with a flair for dissident writing," the man "reads" or enables others to read "texts bearing witness against oppression and inhumanity" (1). Yet, while retaining "the power to grasp meaning and to remember," he does not himself bring testimony, does not speak out of his own experience. Even the child's autobiographical narrative—seemingly that missing testimony—turns out to be another kind of wartime "lie," attesting to the absence of narrative, the muffling of testimony that itself constitutes a kind of testimony of extreme victimization and ongoing trauma.

In *Wartime Lies*, Begley's autobiography is at many degrees fictionalized—by the tempting but unconfirmed implication of factual coincidence with the author's life, by the disquieting play of Maciek's "real" story against the multiple invented lives he puts forth, by the adult narrator's admitted invention of even that "real" story, and by the suggestion of conflicting and non-narrated life stories for that adult. These multiplying layers of fictionality indicate something of the complexities of Holocaust survivor narrative. Indeed, the impossibility of locating within *Wartime Lies* an "actual" story against which to measure the lies implies that something of the actual experience of survival remains always outside narration, accessible only in the interplay between the unstated and the various versions of survival.

As Philippe Lejeune observes in discussing the “autobiographical pact,” “The deep subject of autobiography is the proper name” (20). Autobiographical memory asserts the continuity of the experiencing ego through self-schema, which gives a sense of consistency between past experience and present life narrative.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, autobiography asserts a continued relationship not only between self and memory but between self and world; as Herbert Leibowitz notes, the autobiographical “I cannot be conjugated without the world outside of it” (5).

What constitutes autobiography under conditions that preclude owning one’s “proper name,” conditions that prohibit consistency between the life lived and the life narrated, conditions wherein the “world outside,” if brought together with the conjugating “I,” would annihilate it? The events recollected and recounted by the autobiographical subject who is a Holocaust survivor challenge the deep conventions of the genre; fictional autobiography and autobiographically inspired fiction provide a means to explore the nature of this challenge, as well as the events and repercussions responsible for it.

From Spiegelman’s willingness to concede to the appellation “literature,” and from the manifold references to Lanzmann’s film as “art,” it is clear that for those disturbed by the idea of a fiction of the Holocaust, “literature” or “art” may be distinguished from “fiction” by the question of invention, the departure from what Hayden White has termed “the discourse of the real.” The sentences Vladek recalls uttering during the war years may not match exactly what he said, word for word. Spiegelman did not quote verbatim from the extensive taped conversations with his father, but rather selected key words around which he built the dialogue that appears in *Maus*. Nonetheless, to the best of their abilities both father and son remain faithful to what actually occurred. Spiegelman’s technique then is one of distillation and condensation, not invention; he reduces Vladek’s long statements to their essence. Fiction, as Spiegelman points out, takes different liberties.

To protect their respective projects from the kind of assaults mounted by historical deniers, and to assert the truth claims of their work to an uninitiated readership, Spiegelman and Lanzmann insist upon the “nonfictionality” of Holocaust art. For Spiegelman and Lanzmann, the easy conflation of “fiction” with “lies” threatens the integrity of their respective projects and the credibility of Holocaust representation. An illustration of the prevalence of this easy elision of “lies” and “fiction,” an article entitled “History versus Fiction” published in a journal of Holocaust studies aimed primarily at educators defines the “fiction” under discussion as “the abiding tendency to either deny the Holocaust’s magnitude, or to deny it ever occurred at all”; such over-

laying of “fiction” (or lies) on “history” (or truth), the article goes on, emerges from “the promiscuous intellectual climate today.”<sup>13</sup> To distinguish their work from the lying art of fiction, both Spiegelman and Lanzmann take great care to make visible the autobiographical, biographical, and historical boundaries of their works, and their refusal to invent facts or events. In their works, the absence of the unrepresented past is felt through the presence of remembering survivors rather than through invented scenarios. At the same time, both Lanzmann and Spiegelman acknowledge that, by innovatively manipulating their respective media to contain the story of the destruction of the Jews of Europe, they have produced something different from conventional historical documentation—Spiegelman’s “novelist’s license,” Lanzmann’s description of *Shoah* as “more of a novel than an essay.” Like Spiegelman’s droll suggestion of a new category for “nonfiction: mice,” Holocaust fiction also suggests the need for an expansion of categories, for new classifications, new “taxonomies.”

Lanzmann’s description of his filmic works as *pensée* is most apt in conceptualizing the work of Holocaust fiction. In *Shoah*, Lanzmann explains, “real people . . . play themselves” (Gussow C13) in particular settings and juxtapositions not merely to dramatize a history already known and documented but to suggest new connections between people and events. In many works by survivors of the Nazi genocide, the liberties of fiction enable their authors to contemplate and express what could not be arrived at as well otherwise. It is not a matter of presenting the historian’s work in a manner more emotionally or intellectually accessible to a broad reading public, but of representing one’s own or another’s experiences in a way that opens up complicated questions regarding atrocity, memory, history, and representation. In his discussion of memory and history, Pierre Vidal Naquet observes that “the historian . . . can not, however, say *all*, and what he can no doubt *least* communicate is death as it was experienced by the victims. . . .” (109). While Vladek Spiegelman lives long enough to transmit his remembrances to his son, most victims of Nazi atrocity did not live out the war. Only an imaginative leap reveals what might have been their story, simultaneously reproducing and revoking the radical muteness genocide imposes.

Ida Fink’s “A Spring Morning,” for example, begins with a casual restaurant conversation during which a Polish petty municipal official relates to his friends what he witnessed as the local Jews were marched off to their deaths. An eyewitness, he recollects that a Jewish man crossing the bridge over the Gniezna River “with his wife and his children for the last time in his life” likened the dirty river water to the

color of beer. "Listen to this: Here's a man facing death, and all he can think about is beer" (39). The eyewitness's remark evokes a banal comment—"Maybe the guy was just thirsty, you know?" (40)

The narrative then switches focus and point of view; the ensuing interior monologue recounts the actions and emotions of the Jewish man, now dead, from the moment he rises on the morning of his death, through his stunning realization that he has "overslept his life," his desperate attempt to save his toddler by urging her to run from the line of doomed Jews toward a church, her fatal shooting, and finally, his last moments—carrying his child's corpse to his own death at the mass grave in the forest.

Thus, Fink's story presents two narrations of the day's event: one possible but inadequate, rendered by a surviving eyewitness, the other impossible but revealing, told from the point of view of its murdered victim. Fink's story makes clear that without the fiction—without the narrator's imaginative intercession into historical reality—the murdered man's life, fate, and feelings, the tragic indignity and the superfluous cruelty of his suffering would remain untold, and hence unknowable, consigned by his death to a radical muteness. Worse yet, the space left empty by the absence of his story would be filled, instead, by the narrative of someone whose Aryan ancestry leaves him safely outside the circle of victims whose march to death he watches impassively. "Thanks to him and to people like him, there have survived to this day shreds of sentences, echoes of final laments, shadows of sighs of the participants in the *marches funébres*, so common in those times," (39) the narrative notes, not without irony. An unnamed narrator then steps in to interrupt and to contest the spoken story with which "A Spring Morning" begins and to supplement the available shreds, echoes, and shadows of sighs with the unspoken story of the dead man. From what possible vantage point might the narrator have witnessed the events narrated? If he were among the victims marching toward mass slaughter, then—like the murdered father—he would not be able to narrate the death of the child and parent. If a bystander, he would remain outside the experience of victimization. To call the imagined interior monologue "lies" and the eyewitness report "truth" would go against the ethical movement of the story. "A Spring Morning" explores the retrieval of impossible narratives, giving voice to stories consigned to muteness. Measuring the available eyewitness report with the interior monologue, we find that here the more "factual" account eclipses the truth. For it is the absent story made present by radical imagining that confronts the mass murder that has occurred.

Unlike Spiegelman, Fink embraces the ambivalences of fiction that make possible particular types of telling. Implicit in the develop-



ment of representations different from, but complementary to, the labor of the historian is the presumption that the Holocaust will not remain outside the boundaries of aesthetic representation. Yet the conjunction of fiction with the historical events of the Holocaust has made both readers and writers uneasy since the earliest works appeared. Spiegelman's discomfort with the category of "fiction" occurs within a long history of discomfort not only with Holocaust fictionality but with aesthetic projects generally. May one speak at all of an aesthetics of atrocity? To pose the question so baldly is to appear either disingenuous, uninformed, or already committed to a response. Whether framed explicitly, or simply assumed, this question underwrites, and sometimes overdetermines, critical discussion of poetry, fiction, theater, and film that focuses on the experiences and reactions of victims and former victims of Nazi atrocity. In the decades since the war, readers have, by turns, repudiated the literary discourse as, at worst, misleading lies giving ground to historical revisionists, at best, unseemly and irrelevant; diminished its "soft" ways of knowing in favor of the hard facts of historical accounts; gingerly and apologetically analyzed its texts; seized upon its texts as unmediated historical documentation; revered it as sacred, or as a sublime "dreaming back."<sup>14</sup>

Notwithstanding his own corpus of Holocaust-centered novels, Elie Wiesel asserts an essential incompatibility between fiction and the concentrationary universe: "A novel about Auschwitz is not a novel, or else it is not about Auschwitz."<sup>15</sup> What has the discourse of literature to do with the systematic program of atrocity and mass murder we have come to call the Shoah, the Holocaust, the Churbin? Even the Holocaust survivors who transmute their memories into fiction and poetry regard their own work with ambivalence.

Wiesel's comment, like Spiegelman's request to classify his cartoon book as "nonfiction: mice," cuts to the heart of the conventions by which we categorize and define literary kinds. In counterpoising "novel" against "Auschwitz," the Holocaust novelist—if he is not to refute his own work—suggests that between the poles of chronology and invention, "fiction of the Holocaust" is different from either. Other writers of "Holocaust fiction," like Wiesel, assert that what they recount, if not *true*, is also not *not true*. Moreover, writers like Ida Fink find that a conventional memoir or historical accounting denies them the means to utter certain types of truths.

The critical discourse on the Shoah generally, and on the value of Holocaust literature specifically, has shifted and evolved—shaped and reshaped by successive encounters with the Holocaust writing, by the publication of new material, and innovative literary genres and modal-

ities, by changes in literary criticism and theory generally, and by ongoing conversations among philosophers, historians, and literary critics. Despite these changes, readers continue to argue—often vehemently—about the significance of imaginative literature in thinking about the Holocaust, about whether one *should* write, read, and seriously consider literary representations of the Shoah.

Three fundamental questions underlie the critical concerns about Holocaust literature. (1) Should one read (write) imaginative literature, rather than “straight” history, about the unimaginable, the concentrationary universe? (2) If so, how should one evaluate and understand this literature? (3) Is there a literary mode best suited to represent what has so often been termed unrepresentable? Theodor W. Adorno’s oft-quoted dictum, “Nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch”—“To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric”—(“Engagement” 125), has been echoed by others who, for differing reasons, fear that the transmutation of historical atrocity into imaginative literature necessarily entails a trivialization and betrayal of the real events of the Holocaust. In their respective fields and across disciplines, historians, historiographers and philosophers probe the cognitive and moral limits of representation of the Shoah, poetry and—especially—fiction have come to represent a special case that by definition may exceed the boundaries of ethics and propriety.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the spate of Holocaust-related publications in recent years, the growing audience for popular and scholarly books and films about the Shoah, the burgeoning of Holocaust studies courses on college campuses, and the establishment of new Holocaust museums and monuments, the questions regarding art and atrocity stubbornly resist resolution. Novelist and Shoah survivor Aharon Appelfeld wonders, “. . . horror and art. Can they coexist?” (“After the Holocaust” 83). The problem lies not only with fictional modality but with writing generally, with telling, with narrative. Notwithstanding his own novels, screenplays, and essays drawn from his experiences as a survivor, Arnost Lustig embodies the same paradox as Wiesel when he asserts, “To write of Auschwitz-Birkenau as it was—no one will do” (“Auschwitz-Birkenau” 393). At the heart of Holocaust narrative resides an essential contradiction: an impossibility to express the experience, coupled with a psychological and moral obligation to do so. Former victims of the Nazi genocide frequently express a deep ambivalence about their own Holocaust-centered writing—an ambivalence inscribed in the very unfolding of their narratives. As Maurice Blanchot observes in *The Writing of the Disaster*, “the disaster de-scribes.”

Survivors such as Wiesel, Fink, and Begley develop in practice a poetics of atrocity that contains these ambivalences, working both within and beyond the pale of writing. The critical discourse of Holocaust studies mirrors this ambivalence as it limns the limits of memory and representation, with particular reservations about the confluence of art and atrocity that comprises Holocaust fiction. If not barbaric, as Adorno warned, the literary imagination after Auschwitz is said to domesticate, to trivialize, and to falsify what it seeks to represent.

The moral weight of Shoah writing—its testimonial function—and the massive catastrophe to which it testifies, contribute to a reluctance to read Holocaust narratives as “mere” art—that is, as imaginatively generated and artfully structured rather than historically determined, transparent texts. The horror Adorno expresses at the intersection of art and atrocity lingers in critical discourse decades later, despite the emergence and recognition—even by Adorno himself—of powerful literary treatments of the Shoah. Historians and philosophers often separate out the literary from other forms of narrative that seem less problematic. Thinking about the Holocaust has broadened to include the voices of many methodologies and disciplines, and the resultant ongoing conversations has deepened the way we understand the events and our own reflections. Nonetheless, over the years the place of literary studies and imaginative representation has remained shaky.

One reason that literary texts come to constitute a special category within studies of the Shoah is that, more than other forms of narrative representations, literature foregrounds its own rhetoricity. In fiction and poetry, language is acknowledged and explored not as a transparent medium through which one comes to see reality but as implicated in the reality we see, as shaping our limited and fragile knowledge.

Precisely the strength of this literary way of knowing, however, disquiets many readers. For example, in his 1970 *The Exile of the Word*, André Neher criticized Holocaust literature as an artificial construct, which, like the arguments of Job’s comforters, falsified through interpretation. If one can confront the Holocaust at all, Neher insisted, one must do so outside of art and literature.<sup>17</sup> Fully two decades later, Berel Lang opens his excellent *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide* by first privileging historical writing and then undermining imaginative writing connected with the Shoah: “It seems obvious to me that anything written now about the Nazi genocide against the Jews that is not primarily documentary, that does not uncover new information about the

history of that singular event, requires special justification” (xi). On the other hand, “Wherever it appears, literary representation imposes artifice, a figurative mediation of language, and the contrivance of a persona—that is, a mask—on the part of the writer . . . artifice tends to become conceit, and the writer’s intervention . . . draws attention away from the subject itself.”

Both Neher’s and Lang’s critiques of literary representations of the Shoah center on their sense of a moral obligation to remember and tell the events truthfully, to transmit historically accurate testimony. The artifice of art—the literary form, generic conventions, metaphors—construed as a thing apart from the events narrated, imposes an unwanted (because unreliable, untruthful) structure that occludes rather than reveals lived experience and historical memory. Literature is thus viewed as implicated in the narratological constraints inherent to writing about the historical events—problems for which the Shoah serves as a test-limits case—and, at the same time, as a special case, judged particularly problematic even when other forms of narrative are not. This critique of literary representations of the Shoah is exemplary rather than exceptional; it constitutes the fulcrum for much of the discourse about the Holocaust. Appelfeld recollects being admonished repeatedly, “Keep literature out of that fire zone. Let the numbers speak, let the documents and the well-established facts speak” (“After the Holocaust” 83).

Subsequent thinking about the Shoah develops and interrogates the ongoing and complex discussion about the nature of history, historical truth, and historical relativism, and the variegated shapes of memory, in the context of the Nazi genocide. A collection of essays gathered under the aegis of Saul Friedlander, *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution”*, follows two separate threads of argument that are then explicitly brought together. First, discussion centers on the difficulties and dangers inherent in representing the Holocaust in historical and literary narrative. Does the destruction of European Jewry remain singularly beyond our ability to describe, absorb, and understand? Here, too, imaginative literature poses a special case; citing Theodor Adorno, Friedlander questions the appropriateness of aesthetic forms to represent utter devastation. The second discussion focuses on the debate between traditional and “new,” postmodern historicism and the moral and intellectual implications of each. Can one recover (as modern historians affirm) an objective truth by rigorously scrutinizing documents and interrogating witnesses? Or (as postmodernists assert) does one inescapably interpret—and thus shape—the very history one seeks to document as a necessary part of

the documentary process? And if so, how may one speak of a “pure” and objective historical truth by which to measure competing interpretations? Both of these discussions consider the relationship between actual events and the narratives produced to recover or reconstruct them. Central to the project is an attempt to reconcile the testimonial endeavor associated with Holocaust studies—the search for documentable facts and proof—with the postmodern insight that the opacity of both events and language make historical events inaccessible.

Paradoxically, the very strength of the aesthetic modes in approaching the inaccessible and inarticulable evoke disquietude. To the extent that literary narrative substitutes language for world, or symbol-making over bare chronology, it uneasily evokes the linguistic mechanisms that facilitated the enactment of the Final Solution. In several essays, most notably those contained in *Language and Silence*, George Steiner probes the erosion of literature and of language itself, warped in service for the Nazis. He notes, “Gradually, words lost their original meaning and acquired nightmarish definitions. *Jude, Pole, Russe* came to mean two-legged lice, putrid vermin which good Aryans must squash, as a party manual said, ‘like roaches on a dirty shelf’” (142).<sup>18</sup> The flourishing of atrocity among a highly literate people particularly disturbs Steiner, undermining his trust altogether in the literary endeavor. From the perspectives of literature, philosophy, and history, Lawrence Langer, Hannah Arendt, and George Mosse similarly caution against the comforting but falsifying rhetoricity that helps us to “feel better” without enabling us to “see better” (Langer, *Versions* 12). In different contexts, each notes the close links between emotionally manipulative but ultimately empty tropes and the Nazi reliance on a language laden with metaphor and abstraction, a language designed and successfully utilized to facilitate genocide.<sup>19</sup>

Ironically, the sense of the uniqueness of the Holocaust, its historical unprecedentedness, propelled both Shoah survivors and later thinkers toward imaginative literature, myth, and symbolic representation. But, according to Theodore Ziolkowski, imaginative literature mythifies the Holocaust, lifting “the historical event . . . out of its causative nexus.” The extensive critical discussions of Holocaust literature compound the problem for Ziolkowski by distancing the reader still further from the history. “Instead of confronting the Holocaust, these [critical] writers, like Plato’s artist, actually confront a literary reflection of the Holocaust” (683). However, reflections and representations constitute the only knowledge available to anyone not part of the concentrationary universe. Even the site of atrocity—transformed into what French historian Pierre Nora terms *les lieux de memoire*,

the places of memory—does not offer a transparent medium for viewing what occurred there. Historical narrative also depends for its reconstructions upon language and narratology.<sup>20</sup> The bare chronicle toward which Lang aspires is impossible to attain outside of its rhetoricity.

Nonetheless, as writers and readers measure the stuff of literature against the authority of history, many echo these reservations. The comingling of fact with fiction, reality with artifice, memory with imagination, seemingly undermines the pursuit of truth, so vital to witnessing: of knowing exactly *what* happened in that night world, *to whom*, *by whom*, and *how*. Between verisimilitude and veracity yawns a wide gulf. The suspension of disbelief integral to the reading of fiction runs counter to the exacting demands one places upon testimony: might not one end in a suspension of belief altogether? For many readers share Art Spiegelman's sense of Shoah fiction as a dangerous enterprise, one that adds nothing substantial to our understanding of those events but instead gives fodder to the historical revisionists who deny that the events of the Holocaust occurred at all. Taken to its extreme, fictional representation of the Holocaust appears to some readers to make a fetish of language. Unlike a bare chronology, which aspires to the facts as such, the literary text—in avowing its own artifice, rhetoricity, and contingent symbol-making—threatens to shift and ultimately destroy the grounds by which one measures one set of truth claims or one historical interpretation against another. This fear is expressed perhaps most pressingly by critics of postmodernism, who fear, like David Hirsch, that its “radically skeptical mindset” (24) and its focus on language games and *jouissance* finally efface historical distinctions, precluding ethical thinking.<sup>21</sup>

**I**n the current critical discussion, the facticity of history is frequently said to speak for itself, even if in a manner made more complicated by our growing consideration of the complexities of historical writing. Literary representation remains suspect, its particular attributes seem particularly problematic. The truth claims of historical writing has been linked with an antirhetoric or a pretense to transparent and unadorned rhetoric.<sup>22</sup> Often the “facticity” of historical accounts is contrasted with imaginative representations, and the latter requires justification. Critical readers who find themselves moved by particular works or constellations of works often seek to define a mode of Holocaust writing whose special attributes approximate (or counterbalance) “pure” representation.

In *Versions of Survival*, Lawrence L. Langer explores the different “versions” of survival that survivors evolve, in his analysis, as much to assuage guilt or reaffirm values as to retrieve the truth about what has