Eric Berlatsky
University of Maryland, College Park

The Limits of Postmodern Memory: Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* and Spiegelman's *Maus*.

In one of poststructuralism's most-quoted assertions, Jacques Derrida declared in *Of Grammatology* that "there is no outside-the-text" (158). While Derrida was principally interested in revealing the internal contradictions of foundational philosophy, his declaration also suggests the impossibility of finding "truth," not merely in its transcendental philosophical sense, but also in the possibility of a material and historical "referent." This assertion of the textuality of existence and the impossibility of accessing a reality outside of representation and signification were not initially applied specifically to "history" as a concept by Derrida, but its implications in the postmodern world still resonate, particularly in the case of "traumatic events" and historical incidents that serve as sites of communal identification for oppressed peoples. Likewise, one of the most prominent philosophers of the postmodern, Jean-François Lyotard asserts that postmodernism takes place in the realization that Enlightenment rationalism and scientific positivism are not tied to objective "truth" and "reality," but rather are merely "language games," like narrative itself, that create "the effects of reality," that, in a postmodern age, become "the fantasies of realism" (Lyotard 74). In this context, "realistic" fiction, "objective" history, and positivist science become not only misled in their attempts to configure the world as an eminently understandable and coherent system, they also become ideologically charged deceptive practices that posit an immanent and essentialized world where none exists.

This postmodern emphasis on the "real" as inextricable from the "constructed" and the "textual" has also found its way into both historiography (e.g. Hayden White) and historical fiction with potentially troubling social and political repercussions. This is particularly the case because of the ways in which the historical "real" is a site of political contestation

Over the course of this paper, I will investigate the ways in which the inaccessibility of the "real" and the "truth" as posited by poststructural and postmodern philosophy has political

and social repercussions in the "politics of memory." To do so, I will look closely at two works of postmodernist fiction that deal explicitly with the politics of memory and what Lyotard has labeled the "withdrawal of the real" (79). Radical political and socially directed criticism such as feminist criticism, critical race theory, postcolonial theory, and post-Marxist criticism have been able to employ theories of the postmodern to political advantage. Where scientific positivism once provided the rationale for racialized and gendered oppression and the assertion of repressive hierarchies, the postmodern denaturalization of the objective bases of these oppressions helps to destabilize the implementation of oppressive power. The ability to "create" the self, to "re"-present history, and to "play" in unleashed signifiers is a political opportunity to topple, destroy, and provisionally replace master narratives, such as patriarchy, bourgeois liberalism, and whiteness. However, where many critics and artists committed to radical politics see the discourses of postmodernism as a powerful tool to further their social commitments, others conclude that texts that partake of the postmodern denaturalization of essential and objective truths can disqualify themselves from offering a political alternative that is not, in itself, oppressive. Rather, postmodern fictions can often be seen to self-consciously reveal their own "constructed" nature and their own implication in the tectonics of power.

In this context, it is important to note the central role that personal and communal memory have played in the politically radical arm of postmodern thought. Because history is always written by the victors, the discourse of "official" history has become a central object of postmodern denaturalization. If "institutional history" is the perpetrator and perpetuator of a "master narrative" that marginalizes and confines large portions of a society, the localized and relative "truth" of memory is often seen to be a means of reconstituting identity and fighting repressive power. However, we would do well to remember that where the localized, relativistic truths of personal memory may be championed as counterdiscursive in one context, this counterdiscursive element has its inherent limits, as their relativism and mutability may also be used to oppress. Both Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* and Art Spiegelman's *Maus* propose and illustrate the traditionally central importance of both individual

and collective memory in advancing the political interests of oppressed peoples and particularly in protecting a communality and shared identification from the effacing powers of "official" or "institutional" history. However, both authors also point to the ways in which memory itself is inextricable from "textuality" and can itself be a mode of political oppression. In doing so, both authors foreground the difficulty for oppressed peoples in participating in their own coherent and stable identity formation and representation through memory in the postmodern age. Through the investigation of these two texts, I will show how they reveal the ways in which postmodernism can be not only productive in its destabilization of power, but also problematic in its difficulties in offering concrete and stable counter discourses that do not themselves participate in oppression. *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* and *Maus* stage the problem of the postmodern in the theater of memory, by foregrounding memory's necessity in resisting power, while admitting its own tenuous ties to the "real" and its implication in the abuse of power.

The Book of Laughter and Forgetting opens in 1948, depicting the ability of the totalitarian regime in Prague to deface, erase and rewrite history to suit its own ideological ends. Gottwald, a Communist leader, gives a speech and is accompanied by Clementis. Because it is cold and snowing, Clementis takes off his hat and places it on Gottwald's head. As Kundera describes, the moment becomes famous and is reproduced copiously. Four years later, Clementis is charged with treason and is eventually hanged. "The propaganda section immediately made him vanish from history and, of course, from all photographs...Nothing remains of Clementis but the fur hat on Gottwald's head" (4). Kundera here foregrounds the possibility of, and inherent danger in, the effacing of historical fact. Where Clementis once stood as a symbol of the brotherhood and good-feeling of Communism in its optimistic youth, he is erased when he is no longer useful for a totalitarian regime. As one displaced historian in the novel puts it, "You begin to liquidate a people...by taking away its memory. You destroy its books, its culture, its history...Then the people slowly begins to forget what it is and what it was. The world at large forgets it faster" (218).

In the second scene of the novel, set in 1971, Mirek, a resident of Prague, attempts to prevent the erasure of history through the vehicle of his own memory. Mirek says, "The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting" (4). Mirek keeps a diary, and collects correspondence and minutes of meetings in an effort to preserve and control his memories in the hopes of resisting power.

This notion of memory as an inherent bastion in the battle against oppression is illustrated by, but is by no means limited to, Kundera's *Book*. Similar discourses have been foregrounded in virtually all popular discussions of the Holocaust. In this discourse, the very act of memory becomes a primary constituent of a Jewish identity and is meant to ensure that a similar act of oppression never occurs again. In this context, Jewish writer Cynthia Ozick has emphasized "'the necessity of memory in a time when memory begins to melt into history and history is discarded'" (qtd. in Brogan 263). It is the allegiance to the memory of the Holocaust that has spawned so many narratives of survival of the death camps, including the unorthodox *Maus*, Art Spiegelman's comic book depiction of his father's experience in Auschwitz. The desire to "remember" and to construct a Jewish identity from that memory undoubtedly played a role in Spiegelman's decision to record and represent Vladek's story. It is also this belief in the centrality of memory that leads Artie (Spiegelman's autobiographical representation in *Maus*) to reproach his father, Vladek for destroying the diaries of Anja, Vladek's wife. Like Kundera's depiction of the propaganda machine that obliterates Clementis, Vladek contributes (in Artie's eyes) to the forces of "forgetting" against the forces of memory. Artie's hope for a coherent remembered past to construct his own identity upon is denied by his father's destruction of the diary.

The political importance of memory, foregrounded in these passages, is, of course, not merely hypothetical. The prevalence of self-titled "revisionist historians," labeled instead "holocaust deniers" by their adversaries, represent, for many, the attempt to erase and efface history in an attempt to perpetuate anti-semitism. From these examples, we might be inclined to see both Kundera and Spiegelman operating within (rather than against) a positivist, liberal

humanist aesthetic and ideology. Mirek and Artie's protests against the erasure, or manipulation, of historical fact seem to be an epistemological problem rather than an ontological one. The implication by Mirek is that reality and truth **do** exist, but that totalitarian forces are working to efface them. Likewise, Artie's protests seem to indicate that, given all of the documentary evidence, his mother's identity (and his own) can be recaptured. The binary of memory vs. forgetting positions the institutional (historical) forces on the side of forgetting vs. the personal forces on the side of memory. However, the postmodern aesthetic of these authors suggests that memory, autobiography and memoir, like history, have been unmoored from their tenuous claims to "touching the world" (as Thomas Eakins describes it). Through their employment of this aesthetic, Kundera and Spiegelman place their political defense of memory into question, both by disengaging memory's own ties to referentiality and by exposing memory's role in the circulation of oppressive power. While both authors emphasize the importance of hanging on to the "truth" of memory, they simultaneously show the ways in which history, memory, and identity are matters of social construction, "texts" not truths.

Where Mirek desperately hoards items of memory in an attempt to resist "power," he also attempts to destroy other items that he does not wish to include (or accept) as part of his identity. Mirek sets out on an attempt to destroy love letters he once sent to a former lover by reclaiming the letters from her. He wishes here to create an identity (and a history) for himself out of his selected past. Kundera's reputation as a master ironist is built on such moments as these; where Mirek struggles against institutional power on one hand, he attempts to construct his own identity through an act of power on the other.

> He wanted to efface her from the photograph of his life not because he had not loved her but bec
> where Gottwald had given his historic speech. Mirek rewrote history just like the
> Communist Party, like all political parties, like all peoples, like mankind. They shout
> that they want to shape a better future, but it's not true. The future is only an
> indifferent void no one cares about, but the past is filled with life, and its countenance is
> irritating, repellent, wounding, to the point that we want to destroy or repaint it. We
> want to be masters of the future only for the power to change the past. We fight for
> access to the labs where we can retouch photos and rewrite biographies and
> history. (*The Book* 34)

While Gottwald operates on a macro-level, manipulating memory-objects like the photograph to reconstruct the nation's collective memory, Mirek does the same work on a personal level with the desire to destroy his letters. With *The Book*'s deconstruction of the immanence of memory and the referentiality of both text and image, it is no longer possible to merely see memory as something that is repressed, resistant to the constructed "plot" of "official history." Rather, memory itself is a construction that takes part in oppression and the abuse of power. Likewise, Kundera's continuous dissolution of genre distinctions, including history, autobiography, novel and essay further puts concrete distinctions between history, memory, and fiction into question.

If we turn then to Spiegelman's text, we may note that the Holocaust undoubtedly qualifies as a traumatic event that would seem to lie outside the possibility of narration and the plenitude of meaning. Art Spiegelman has, indeed, referred to the Holocaust as "the central trauma of the twentieth century" (qtd. in LaCapra 140). While the traumatic event often leads to the "repression" of memories of the event, it also leads to the attempt to control, narrate, and give meaning to the event through memory.

As Sander Gilman has shown, in the nineteenth century Jewish identity had been constructed from without by scientific discourses that constructed "Jew" as a race rather than as a religion. The figure of the Jew becomes, for Gilman, an ideal site for poststructural denaturalization of the social text of nineteenth (and early twentieth) century discourse that posed scientific positivism as a master narrative.

In the wake of the deconstruction of an imposed pseudo-scientific Jewish racial identity, memory has become increasingly important in reconstructing a Jewish community. While biological positivist notions of racial difference have been exposed as social construction, the material effects of those discourses have helped *create* a community with common experiences, bound together not only by shared experiences and traditions, but also by shared persecution. Again, however, we must observe that such reinscription is neither ideologically free from

pitfalls, nor unmediated in its access to a shared past. As Marc Ellis has observed, the reincorporation of a traumatic memory to build a primary identity is not necessarily liberatory in constructing a personal or religious identity. Rather, Ellis observes how it was only in the wake of Israel's 1967 war that "Jews articulated for the first time both the extent of Jewish suffering during the Holocaust and the significance of Jewish empowerment in Israel" (qtd. in Rothberg 680). This in turn, claims Ellis, began to give Jewish consciousness a primary identity of "innocence and redemption," building Jewish identity out of the role of "innocent victims" and building the identity of Israel to be one of "messianic redemption" (Rothberg 680). Like Kundera, Ellis sees the construction of identity through memory as a potential use of power to oppress others. Memory is here not merely used to create a collective consciousness, or to fight off the erasure of history by Holocaust revisionists, but also to legitimate Zionist aggression.

It is in this context that Art Spiegelman embarks on his own representation of Vladek's "survival testimony." Like Kundera, Spiegelman partakes of a postmodern aesthetic that places the "truth value" of memory, history, and identity into question, rarely if ever claiming for himself the historical accuracy of "truth-telling" that might allow for the co-option of his work into essentialist constructions of history or Jewish identity. Like Kundera, Spiegelman uses multiple generic conventions in order to separate his work from a univocal survivor's testimony or a historical document. Spiegelman's book is biography, autobiography, comic book, animal fable, oral history, and graphic novel all at once. Although the books are labeled as "Holocaust/ Autobiography," the supposedly "real" representations of people are drawn in comic-book form and as animals. Spiegelman, in this way, literalizes and deconstructs the stereotypical Nazi assessment of Jews as vermin and disease carriers in order to portray the anthropomorphic mice as strikingly human. Simultaneously, however, Spiegelman is sure to distance his Holocaust narrative from any claim to actual "truth."

Spiegelman creates a hybrid category that both relies on identity, history and memory and visually deconstructs them as essentialist notions. Spiegelman's allegiance to historical "accuracy" is seen in his careful reconstruction of people, places and events. Nevertheless,

accompanying Spiegelman's efforts at positivist reconstruction are denaturalizing acknowledgments of the futility of this attempt. *Maus* is not merely the story of Vladek's survival, it is also the story of Artie's telling of that survival. In elaborating these narrative frames, Spiegelman provides himself with opportunities to question the truth value of memory and the results of constructing identity out of memory, even as he relates the "truth" of Vladek's story. Particularly in *Maus II,* Artie begins to show an intense realization of the problems inherent in historical production,

> **Artie:** Sigh. I feel so inadequate trying to reconstruct a reality that was worse than my darkest too complex for comics...So much has to be left out or distorted.
> **Françoise:** Just keep it honest honey.
> **Artie:** See what I mean...In real life you'd never have let me talk this long

Like Kundera, Spiegelman here foregrounds the literary production of his supposedly mimetic work. Not only does "Artie" admit the inherent pitfalls in narrativizing history, he also subverts the binary of reality/fiction by having the "fictional" Artie comment on his own status as literary production. "If this was real life," he says, highlighting the fact that, of course, this representation of life is not life, while at the same time narrating the impossibility of representing "life" accurately. In addition, the historiography of *Maus* is always presented through Spiegelman's representations, representations which carry the tremendous power of allegorical iconography in addition to his own choice of what "facts" to represent and how to represent them. In this scene, Artie asserts his own power in controlling representation by "allowing" Françoise the opportunity to speak, literally controlling the words that come out of her mouth. Elsewhere, Artie experiments with several sketches of Françoise to use for *Maus*. Artie controls the ways in which we perceive Françoise, much as anti-Semitic discourse controlled perceptions of Jews in the years preceding the Holocaust. Spiegelman's self-reflexive portrayal of this problematic helps provisionalize the memories and history he shows us.

Where memory in *Maus* might initially be seen as a stable and clear way to fight social and political oppression, it soon becomes destabilized and questionable in Spiegelman's

postmodern self-reflexivity. By refusing to allow Vladek a univocal presentation of events, Spiegelman is careful not to allow traumatic memory to define Vladek, and the Jewish people in general, as "victims" who remain innocent. Vladek, through Artie's eyes, is seen to be a racist and a miser, someone neither Artie nor Françoise can stand. What is more, the text refuses to allow the Holocaust as an excuse for domineering and occasionally hate-filled behavior.

Vladek's racism is especially telling in showing the dangers of constructing narratives out of memory. When Vladek balks at the prospect of picking up a black hitchhiker and inscribes him with familiar stereotypes, it is clear that Vladek's memory does not provide him with a sense of communality for those similarly oppressed, but rather gives him a sense of entitlement.

Here the postmodern denaturalization of essentialized racial identities for Jews is not extended to the "shvartzers," as Vladek calls them. Instead, the reconstruction of Jewish identity, built partially on the Holocaust, reconstructs the Jew as "white," as the black man's "other." While Jews themselves were often configured as black, as equivalent to those of African descent in nineteenth century racialist discourse (see Gilman, *The Jew's Body* 99-101, 234-43), this discursive transformation of Jews from black to white, allows for the transformation of the Arab in Palestine into an "other", rather than a sibling in racial oppression. As Edward Said has pointed out, Zionism may be a positive site of communal identity formation for the Jew, but it remains a site of racist inscription for the Arab inhabitants of Israel. The Arabs are seen as "outlandish, strange, hostile..." (Said 216), much as Vladek sees the black hitchhiker. Although Spiegelman may not be referencing this analogy directly in this scene, he is undoubtedly highlighting the discursive production of racial identity and the ways in which identity can be constructed at the expense of others. That memory is seen throughout *Maus* as a primary identifier for Jews highlights its role in constructing new narratives that threaten to inscribe "others." In this sense Jonathan Boyarin's advice to avoid the construction of identity based on place (specifically Zionist Israel) and replace it with identification based on memory is

subtly questioned. It is, at least partially, the reconstruction of a narrative based on memory, that allows the (over)identification with the state of Israel.

As Kundera comments on the irony of Mirek exerting his memory's power onto his ex-lover, Spiegelman continually draws attention to the constructedness of Vladek's narrative and its potential use as an instrument of oppression. Spiegelman continually foregrounds his story as "text," and not as "truth," showing, like Kundera, that memory, history and identity are all, at least in part, constructions that are part of ideological and political oppression.

While Lyotard refers to the postmodern as the "withdrawal of the real," writers of postmodern fiction like Kundera and Spiegelman are not so quick to abandon the "real" as an object of contestation. Rather, both writers insist on the importance of asserting the "real" of memory as a bulwark against the "master narratives" constructed by a dominant history. At the same time, however, both authors show us how the postmodern tendency to denaturalize dominant totalizing narratives applies simultaneously to the "resistant" narratives that are posited as replacements. Their self-reflexive narratives of memory both assert the "truth" of the real and simultaneously foreground its constructedness in an effort to prevent its co-option by "new" metanarratives that oppress others. In this sense they reflect Richard Terdiman's theory of memory. Terdiman argues that memory is dialectically constructed as both "reproduction" and "representation." "Reproduction" is that part of memory connected to a sense of the "real," that is, reproducing events "as they happened," while "representation" is the creative distortion of the "real" that is inevitable both in memory and in its linguistic presentation (59-60). Historically engaged postmodern fictions like those of Kundera and Spiegelman partake liberally of both sides of this dichotomy, insisting on the connection to the "real" that partakes of the "reproduction" side of the memory dialectic while self-reflexively partaking of the dynamic construction that takes place in the "representation" side of memory. By doing so, they question the assumptions of "master narratives" that insist on one unifying "truth" tied to "reality," while simultaneously questioning the assumptions of that branch of postmodern theory which configures "postmodernism" as completely disqualified from political involvement because of its

"withdrawal from the real." Rather, Spiegelman and Kundera's fictions posit a "return of the referent" (signified perhaps most clearly by the image of Clementis' hat which remains in the photograph) while acknowledging the continuous integration of that referent into a narrative "representation" that mediates and deforms any possibility of pure memory "reproduction." It is this half of the dialectic that leads Kundera to write, "We know reality as it is in the present, in the moment when it's happening, when it *is*. The present moment is unlike the memory of it. Remembering is not the negative of forgetting. Remembering is a form of forgetting."

My reading here of postmodern historical fiction as attached both to "reproduction" and to "representation" is in opposition to a contemporary critical trend that socially and politically recuperates postmodernism by positing uncertainty and undecidability as an ethics in itself. Simon Critchley suggests that Derridean poststructuralism is "ethical" in its insistence on seeing the "Other" (that which is outside) as "other" (incomprehensible, irreducibly different) rather than as a means of constructing meaning. Andrew Gibson likewise sees the ethic of postmodern fiction in its insistence on maintaining "alterity" rather than attempting to explain or make sense of its subject matter. For Gibson the "ethics" of postmodern fiction lies in its ability to "indicate the finitude of ontological discourse, its lack of purchase on the 'real'" (63).

While critics like Gibson and Critchley find a certain "ethics" in the "withdrawal from the real," others are concerned that the abandonment of ontology or a stress on the "finitude of ontological discourse" places postmodernist works outside of social and historical praxis. Dominick LaCapra, for instance, questions the poststructural historiography of critics like Hayden White and Frank Ankersmit, precisely because of their incapacity to acknowledge the "real" historical events (like the Holocaust) that are so central to communal identity formation or radical politics precisely *as* "real," or existing beyond mere arbitrary textual "construction." Kundera and Spiegelman works stress the importance of maintaining a sense of the "true" and the factual while acknowledging and foregrounding the ways in which history and memory both become deeply textual "stories" without direct access to "truth." In doing so, they stress the true importance of the debate over history and memory in the postmodern age. While it is possible to

construct a hypothetical "ethics" in radical alterity and the sublimity of uncertainty, when "true" events or historical facticity is essential in constructing a community identification or a radical politics, such uncertainty seems unsatisfactory. The texts I have discussed instead suggest the need for a new way to configure the "real" as an accessible way to found identity and fight "power" without proffering it as an inviolable "truth" that excludes and abuses.

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