

A postmodernist reading of spiegelman's maus



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An element of tension runs through both volumes of Art Spiegelman's *Maus*. The two narratives running parallel to each other throughout *Maus*, namely those of Art and his father Vladek, converge at the end of volume two in a shaky synthesis. The two narratives, do not, however, totally reconcile so well with each other so as to go from thesis to antithesis to synthesis. The last few panels of *Maus* reveal, instead, that biography and history are messy and full of conflict, and that no amount of "leaving the past behind" can erase some of the effects that the one narrative has on the other. Art, while recounting the past of his father, also punctuates the story by revealing the interviewing process that took place with he and his father in Rego Park and Florida. In Vladek's reminiscing, we get the image of a person who is resourceful, clever, loving and who possesses a strong survivalist streak. In the portion of the comic where "Art" the character is involved, we see a weakened, paranoid, miserly, stubborn and fairly racist old man: "It's not even to compare the shvarsters to the Jews!" (Spiegelman, 99). Throughout the portion where Art speaks as a character, he notes the striking difference between the man he knows as his father and the man he's writing about in his comic book: "I can't make sense out of my relationship with my father...how am I supposed to make any sense out of Auschwitz?" (Spiegelman, 14). Art wants to believe that Vladek was made into what he is during the war, despite characters like Mala telling him that, in all likelihood, the war at best brought something out that was already in him: "All our friends went through the camps. Nobody is like him!" (Spiegelman, 131). To this extent, the two narratives compliment elements of each other: the "past" narrative sheds light on some of the possible consequences of the "present" narrative. On the other hand, they also

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disagree with each other: why would Vladek generalize black people when his own people were treated in such a similar manner? As well, is his stinginess a trait acquired in the camps or was it a character flaw that served him well in that particular situation? The two narratives, therefore, stand not only as thesis and antithesis, but also generate a series of theses, antitheses and syntheses in an almost infinite regress. Throughout the comic, the reader is reminded that the past always haunts the present. Vladek tries burning his late wife's, Anja's, journals about the camps, and reveals later that he tried to forget everything and live the remainder of his days in peace: " All such things of the war, I tried to put out of my mind once and for all...until you rebuild me all this from your questions." (Spiegelman, 98).

However, this was not to be, as the son he spawned post-WWII would come back with eager questions. This is an example of the present questioning the past, and inquiring into it in order to understand itself. The present is informed by its past, and relies on it in order to exist. The fallout of this is that the past can't escape itself, and is forever enshrined in the things and people it ultimately produces. The present then constantly seeks to identify itself through antecedents. Again, this is where the infinite loop of thesis, antithesis and synthesis come into play. The most glaring example of this resides in the last few panels of Maus, where Vladek, uttering his apparent last words, lies down to sleep, and calls his son Art by the name of his deceased son, Richiev: " I'm tired from talking Richiev, and it's enough stories for now..." (Spiegelman, 136). The comic ends on that note,

suggesting by an image of a tombstone that Vladek died not long thereafter.

Vladek had lost his first son in the war, and afterward had another son: Art.

The deceased son is a symbol of the thesis of Vladek's old, dead life, and Art

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acts as a symbol for the antithesis which is his new one: "The photo [of Richiev] never threw tantrums or got into any kind of trouble...It was an ideal kid and I was pain in the ass. I couldn't compete." (Spiegelman, 15). In the end, Art and Richiev converge on each other in a synthesis which says that there was something never reconciled in Vladek's biography before Art was conceived. Vladek's dying leaves Art in an infinite loop of questioning and conflict. He is left to forever invoke the past with no one to guide him through it. The more the two narratives bump into each other in this story, the messier the story becomes, as it leads Art Spiegelman to more and more questions without answers. Maus acts not only as another testimony of the horrors of the Holocaust, but as a commentary about what effect the past and its trauma have on everything that comes thereafter. The legacy of something and the thing itself are inextricably linked, and no amount of forgetting can undo that connection or provide a satisfying level of closure.

1. Maus: A Survivor's Tale. Vol. 1. N. p.: Apex Novelties, 1972. 2 vols. Print.
Spiegelman, Art. 2. Spiegelman, Art. Maus: A Survivor's Tale. Vol. 2. N. p.: Pantheon Books, 1991. 2 vols. Print.