The Language of Survival

English as Metaphor in Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*

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Writing on the Holocaust regularly reflects on the languages spoken by victims and perpetrators. However, English, as a primary language of neither, rarely and only marginally receives attention. Yet in *Maus*, Art Spiegelman emphasizes the extraordinary role English plays in aiding his father’s survival. The prominence of English in the chronicle of events implicitly directs attention to the fractured English in which the survivor’s story is told and, more generally, to the complex significance of language and languages in representing the Holocaust.

*Maus’s* exceptional concern with English operates on at least three levels. First, in Vladek’s biography, his knowledge of and competence in English is important both for initiating his relationship with Anja and for aiding or determining his survival while in concentration camps. Second, Spiegelman presents Vladek’s narrative of survival in immigrant English, rife with errors and neologisms. In contrast to the biographical events recounted, Vladek’s English here is noteworthy not because of competence but rather because of incompetence. Third, the fluent English of virtually all other characters (even those who, like the psychotherapist, Pavel, are also immigrants) frames and envelopes both Vladek’s biography and his Holocaust narrative, establishing English as the dominant language. These three levels interrogate the status of English as a language of the Holocaust and, consequently, as a language (un)fit to recount the Holocaust.

*Maus’s* interrogation of English can be situated in the context of previous efforts to assess the significance of specific languages in relation to the Holocaust. While these attempts have focused primarily on Yiddish, Hebrew, and German, they have also considered other European tongues, including English. Sidra Ezrahi, for example, positions English in opposition to Yiddish and German, the major languages of the victim and persecutor, respectively (12). In contrast, English, of little significance in the camps and ghettos, has a marginal standing, making it an “outsider” and marking it with “autonomy” and “purity.” Moreover, Ezrahi places English in opposition in another way: as the chief language of the Allies, English came to stand for “defiance,” for “a different hierarchy of values,” values presumably informed by the democratic ideals associated with English-speaking countries.

Yet if this ascription of purity and legacy of defiance implies for English a certain heroic stature, Ezrahi’s schema also suggests its vulnerability: because it was not vitally implicated in the events of the Holocaust, English is less qualified to represent them. This reservation has informed writing and testimony in, and commentary on, English. One of the most important English anthologies of Holocaust writing, for instance, registers the degree that English stands, as it were, in the shadow of the primary languages. “The Book of Books, out of the depths of the Sacred Martyrdom,” writes the editor of that volume, Israel Knox, “will not find its first and original home in English or French or Russian, but in Hebrew and Yiddish” (xiv). Even though some languages can serve testimony better than others, he continues, “no item was included or excluded from the anthology solely because of language.” Yet when, out of a wish to be “comprehensive and represent[ative],” Knox cites languages other than the primary ones, he does not refer to English: “There are items here from Yiddish and Hebrew but also from the French and German and Russian and Polish” (xv). To be sure, he goes on to note that the “sensitive and perceptive” reader will be able to distill the essence from an English translation. But at best, English plays only a tertiary role.

Intervening in this complex, even antithetical legacy of English as a language of the Holocaust, Spiegelman’s *Maus* makes the position of English itself a theme. Indeed, this self-reflexive investigation of English begins with the title. On first hearing, the title would seem to be in English, the word “maus/mouse” paralleling the audacious animal imagery Spiegelman uses to represent the Jews. But while the title is phonetically English, Spiegelman actually writes (draws?) it in German, a gesture that not so much eliminates
the English as, I would suggest, "contaminates" it, associating it with, rather than opposing it to, the essential languages of the Holocaust.

This strategy would seem to endow English with an authority that it previously lacked. There are, however, several ways that the association not only confers authority but provokes suspicion. First, the title links English with German, the language of the persecutors, a linkage that implicitly associates English with the debate regarding the fitness of German as a language of representing the Holocaust. And second, the devious German of the visualized title estranges the English, making it, for the American reader, not only curious but foreign, rendering the once familiar and comfortable into something strange and disconcerting.

Spiegelman’s choice of title, and choice of how to draw it, suggests the complex ways he reformulates the issue of representing the Holocaust in English. On the one hand, he challenges its legacy of purity, moving English from outside to inside the Holocaust. On another level, by positing English as foreign, he frustrates the American audience’s sense of familiarity, moving the reader, in a sense, from inside to outside the Holocaust.

This essay will elaborate the strategies Spiegelman employs throughout *Maus* to effect this reformulation and revaluation of English. Admittedly, to foreground the verbal dimension of *Maus* may seem to miss what is most singular about its approach to the Holocaust: the cartoons. But, as these preliminary comments suggest, this graphic novel compels attention to its words.

English becomes a subject in the first represented conversation between Vladek and Anja. Vladek reveals to Anja that he has deciphered the private conversation in which Anja and her cousin praise Vladek (1:16). Anja and her cousin spoke in English to protect their secret; Vladek’s capacity to “know” English comes as a surprise, displaying not only his hitherto hidden capacity to negotiate English but also his access to the secrets that, in this case, were conveyed within and by means of English. English thus initially takes on a number of striking associations. As a language of secrets, it signifies a language spoken to prohibit understanding, specifically, the understanding of the one who is being spoken about.

The associations around secrecy, resistance, and access also address the complex relation of Vladek and Anja as presented in *Maus*, for in this initial encounter Vladek understands (or at least in his recounting suggests an understanding of) certain information that Anja would prefer he did not.

Whereas Anja resorts to English to deflect his understanding, Vladek employs it to appropriate a sensitive cluster of thought and feeling not his own. This dynamic parallels the ongoing issue of Vladek’s belief that he has full access to Anja’s story, a belief put in doubt repeatedly by Art’s counter-belief that Anja’s memoirs would give an alternative version of the events his parents lived through. In his recounting of this episode, then, Vladek has command of even that which seems most secret, most impenetrable. In essence, English on this level suggests a fantasy of complete mastery. Indeed, it is a fantasy that accumulates economic, political, and psychological associations as the story unfolds.

Tellingly, the discovery that Vladek understands English (and hence understands the appreciation Anja feels for him) steers their initial conversation to further consideration of the role of English in their lives, considerations this time dominated by economic and class issues. To Anja’s question “Did you study it [English] in school?” Vladek responds, “I had to quit school at about 14 to work” (1:16), a reply that sets out sharply contrasting class assumptions and realities. In assuming that English is learned “in school,” Anja is seemingly guided and constricted by her upper-class sensibility, a sensibility that takes for granted the leisure and resources required for children to attend school. Vladek’s motivation for learning English—“I always dreamed of going to America” (1:16)—continues to suggest contrasting class orientations. Whereas Anja acquires her English as part of a secure life lived in a land of plenty, Vladek acquires his based on a “dream,” a fantasy of life in a different land, America. The dream of America, while never spelled out, implies a society redeemed by an alternative social vision—a vision of radical social mobility and opportunity, in other words, where a child would not have to quit school in order to support a family. Such a dream also, of course, offers an alternative to the social stratification that so powerfully governs the contrasting methods by which Anja and Vladek have acquired English.

What America (and the English associated with it) stands for in *Maus* is ambiguous and complex, partaking of the associations of Vladek’s dream but going beyond it as well. At this stage of *Maus*, English is not yet a language of survival. Rather, this first meeting represents English as a romantic language of secrets and deciphering as well as a property that is acquired through various kinds of labor. Indeed, it is through the speaking of, and the speaking about, English that one sees class as a key factor in accounting for experience and perception in *Maus*. Moreover, English becomes the site in which fantasies of both mastery and transformation are entertained and
played out. These fantasies will continue to operate when, in three remarkable episodes in *Maus II*, English becomes the language of survival and the language of the survivor.

Early in *Maus II*, English returns to the foreground, serving as a form of knowledge that can generate extraordinary transformations. In the context of the concentration camp, this power to transform can determine survival. After deportation to Auschwitz and separation from Anja upon arrival, Vladek tries simply to remain alive. Faced with little food, insufficient clothing, and a constant threat of brutal death, relief comes in an unexpected manner. The kapo of Vladek's barracks decides to find a tutor in English and, after examining the proficiency of the candidates, deems Vladek the best qualified. During his three-month tenure as the kapo's tutor, Vladek is able to eat and dress well and to obtain protection. Under the eye of a Polish kapo interested in bettering his own circumstances, English becomes the key to survival.

English can have such leverage because, in the kapo's words, its "worth." The kapo wants to learn English because it will stand him in good stead with the Allies when the war is over. In the kapo's view, language is generally a means to improve social status, and English is the specific instrument to achieve that end in the future. The kapo's reference to the worth of English indicates that English has the capacity not only to aid survival but also to secure privileged status in the society one inhabits.

This view of the worth of English suggests that English is not "pure," that it does not inhabit a place outside camp society but rather, like other commodities, is subject to the particular logic and laws of camp life. And like other simple commodities in Auschwitz for which there is great demand and little supply, its value rises astronomically.

Vladek's competence in English, and the association with the kapo that it garners, enables him to achieve a meteoric rise in status. By means of this facility he obtains not only food but also preferential clothing—"With everything fitted," says Vladek, "I looked like a million" (II:33)—and secures privileges with which he can help friends. That Vladek's rise in status is so closely associated with his competence in English is powerfully suggestive. For paradoxically, in the midst of the deprivation of Auschwitz, Vladek's success fulfills his "dream of America"—a dream of transformation that presumably centered on the acquisition of material abundance and originally motivated his own study of English.

The power of English to transform circumstances continues even as conditions worsen. The next instance in which English figures centrally occurs in the last stages of the war, after Vladek and the other prisoners in Auschwitz were compelled to endure a death march. Ending up in Germany, in the concentration camp Dachau, Vladek registers the new degree of torment he underwent: "And here, in Dachau, my troubles began" (II:91). It is this phrase, of course, that Spiegelman uses for the subtitle of *Maus II*. On one level, the phrase is clearly ironic because absurd: Vladek's troubles began significantly earlier. The clumsiness of the formulation is also emblematic of the problems involved in telling a story of this kind. By emphasizing through the subtitle an idiom that is inappropriate for the circumstances to which it refers, Art calls attention to both Vladek's foreignness—the difficulty of mastering English idioms—and to the foreignness of the experience—a degree of suffering that resists idiomatic formulation.

On another level, however, it is clear that Vladek (or Art) wishes to suggest with this phrase that a new dimension of anguish here enters the story, anguish generated by a set of conditions in Dachau at the end of the war that brings Vladek closer to death than ever before—they were, he says, "waiting only to die" (II:91). Here, then, when conditions have become most acute, English once again determines survival. On the verge of starvation, Vladek meets a Frenchman who, in a camp filled only with Eastern Europeans, is desperate to find someone to speak to. Vladek and the Frenchman discover they share a common language, English, and daily conversation relieves the Frenchman's isolation. Grateful to Vladek, the Frenchman, a non-Jew who benefits from extra rations mailed to him via the Red Cross, "insisted," says Vladek, "to share with me, and it saved me my life" (II:93).

Several aspects of this episode recall the earlier situation in Auschwitz: Vladek's interlocutor is a non-Jew, a fellow prisoner, and English is a language foreign to both speakers. Again, Vladek's ability to speak English results in his receiving abundant food in a situation where others are starving to death. The worth of English, however, is at least tacitly redefined. English here is not valued as a commodity but rather as a therapy, as a means of countering the madness of isolation that the Frenchman suffers. The salvific encounter with the Frenchman in Dachau also recalls the original English episode with Anja. As in that case, Vladek's ability to speak English provokes in the Frenchman an identical question: "How do you know English?" Vladek's response is virtually the same one he gave to Anja, foregrounding the "dream of America" as the motivating force for learning English.

Once in America, however, Vladek's dream of the future becomes trans-
formed into a nightmare about the past, and this transformation is most glaringly felt when Spiegelman refers again to the French benefactor and to the English that linked him and his father. The two corresponded after the war, writing in English, an English that Vladek "taught him," but Vladek destroyed the letters along with Anja's memoirs.

Up to the end of the war, the English that plays such a vital role in Vladek's story is spoken only by non-native speakers, by those for whom English is the "other tongue." Although thus far in Maus II knowledge of English has meant the power to determine survival, "knowledge" refers to only a relative mastery, a timely, if partial, competence among those who have little or none. But when the American army arrives, the real masters of the language set the standard for competence. Nevertheless, English continues to play a vital, if altered, role in Vladek's story. Notably, Vladek's knowledge of English no longer needs to be the key to survival that it was in the previous episodes. Although no longer the language of survival per se, English becomes the language of the survivor. For, in response to the army's command "Identify yourselves" (II: 111), Spiegelman does not represent Vladek giving his name or any other of the usual factual details that might well be the common response to such a command. Rather, Vladek responds by telling for the first time his story of "how we survived to here" (II: 112). Importantly, although they are still in Europe, the first telling of the story of the Holocaust is in English, and to an American audience, a telling, moreover, that is linked to identity.

Even while English is playing a key role in negotiating the change from survival to survivor and in constructing Vladek's postwar identity as a witness, the encounter with the native speakers of English ushers in another, more problematic dimension. As the liberated Vladek settles in with the Americans and English becomes the language of daily discourse, there is something unsettling about the relations that are mediated by the English they speak. For as it turns out, this English is spoken as much by colonizers as by liberators. Initially, Vladek and his friend are permitted to stay with the Americans only on the condition that they "keep the joint clean and make our beds" (II: 112). The condition, in other words, is that Vladek and his friend serve as domestic servants for the soldiers. This imposition of servant status as the condition for staying under the protection of the Americans is accentuated when the frame that Spiegelman uses to exemplify the work that the survivors do shows Vladek receiving gifts for shining shoes and being called "Willie" (II: 112), servile work and nomenclature that recall the stigmatized position imposed by white Americans on "Negroes" of this time. Although they conquer the Nazis and set free their victims, the American liberators are nevertheless primed, through gesture and language, to enact the role of colonizer, even subjecting (while liberating) those for whom, presumably, they have gone to war in the first place. In this climactic episode, then, when English as other tongue encounters English as mother tongue, English thus becomes even more deeply associated with mastery and domination.

How does this account of English as the language of survival inform the story Vladek tells in English, the story told by the survivor? How are we to understand the association of English with knowledge, with power, with transformation, and eventually with the capacity to attest to one's identity, on the one hand, and the fractured English with which Vladek testifies, on the other hand? And how does the tension between English as the competent language of survival and English as the incompetent language of the survivor address the issue of representing the Holocaust in English and the issue, more generally, of representing the Holocaust?

In one respect, the function of this "incompetence" is clear and forceful. Vladek's accented English is mimetically appropriate for a Polish Jewish immigrant to America, and critics have noted in this light that Art has a "good ear." But, I want to suggest, Vladek's "tortured visualized prose" (N. K. Miller, "Cartoons of the Self" 58) is not only meant to represent an English-speaking "foreigner" but is also meant to torture English into being a foreign language. Indeed, this quality of "foreignness" is the means by which English can become a language of testimony. By fracturing Vladek's English and by making it the most foreign language in Maus (a point to which I will return), Spiegelman uses it to convey the foreignness of the Holocaust itself.

That the torturing of Vladek's English does more than reveal Art's ear for language can be appreciated by contrasting it with the way Spiegelman represents the language of the other survivors in Maus. These other émigrés—Mala, Pavel, and Anja—also European-born and arriving in the United States no earlier than the end of the war, would seem to be candidates for an accent more or less equal to that of Vladek. But Spiegelman presents them as fluent in English, speaking like natives, virtually without accent. We know that these survivors are foreigners only by what they say and what is said.
about them, not by how they say it. It is for Vladek alone that Spiegelman reserves the distortions of syntax, the malapropisms, the quirky idiom—the stylistic correlates, as it were, of an accent.11

Although the inflection of an individual voice, Vladek’s accent also shapes the aesthetic structure of Maus, providing Spiegelman with the means to represent, and distinguish, present and past. For a time, says Spiegelman, he entertained the possibility of drawing the past episodes in black and white, the present episodes in color, but rejected such a blunt visual dichotomy as too simplistic (“Art on Art,” The Complete Maus).12 Yet what resisted visual coding yielded to an aural one: for episodes in the past, Spiegelman uses fluent, colloquial English to represent the languages of Europe as spoken by their native speakers; for episodes in the present, Vladek’s broken, accented English serves as a constant marker. On the surface this strategy seems misguided; Continental languages do not deserve an English better than English itself. But within the terms Maus establishes, Vladek’s broken English becomes the means by which Spiegelman articulates the incommensurability between present and past.

Spiegelman’s decision to place a distinctive burden on Vladek’s English as a vehicle to represent the Holocaust came only after experimentation with other options. The earliest publication of the Maus project, a three-page vignette appearing in 1972, already draws Vladek recounting his ordeal by means of a “tortured prose.”13 But, for at least two reasons, Vladek’s accented narration in this earlier installment is less well defined and exceptional than it becomes in later full-length treatment. First, Vladek speaks with an accent not only when he is recounting his story but also when he is shown in his European past; the distinction that informs both Maus I and Maus II between Vladek in America and Vladek in Europe, between Vladek in the present and Vladek in the past, does not obtain. Second, and perhaps even more fundamental, is that all European Jews “speak” with an accent. “The safest thing it would be that we kill him” (2), says one of the Jews hiding in Françoise’s seemingly charitable gesture, stops to pick up a black hitchhiker, whom Spiegelman finds most foreign to the American readers of Maus; it is rather the telling about the Holocaust, the testimony, that carries the burden of everything that is foreign.

That Vladek’s broken English testimony is meant to carry immense authority is attested by the single instance in which Vladek speaks from a different vantage point. On the way home with Vladek from the supermarket, Art’s wife, Françoise, stops to pick up a black hitchhiker, whom Spiegelman represents as speaking a highly inflected (and also visually “tortured”) form of Black English. Vladek condemns Françoise’s seemingly charitable gesture, using degrading racial stereotypes to justify his own admonishments. Inclusion of this unflattering view of Vladek’s bigotry—he himself, according to Art, seems to have not learned the lesson of the Holocaust—is clearly meant to complicate the reader’s reaction to Vladek.

But the episode is made more remarkable by Spiegelman’s deployment of Vladek’s language. For at the moment when the hitchhiker speaks broken English, Vladek relinquishes his own. Instead, he expresses his bigoted regrets in his native Polish (the only example of Vladek speaking Polish in either Maus I or II), represented here first in the original, then underscored with a fluent English translation. To be sure, Vladek’s recourse to his native Polish allows him to vent his chauvinism without infuriating the other passengers in the car. But the movement from English to Polish also mobilizes a set of representational values. No longer telling the story of the Holocaust but rather uttering racial slurs, it is as if Vladek has foregone the right to the “tortured” English that is the vehicle for his testimony. In reverting to his native Polish, he finally regains a fluency—even the English translation has overcome the foreignness that defines his usual American voice—but that fluency comes at the expense of, and suspends, the authority his tortured English evinces. Moreover, the episode witnesses a shift of roles and voices, for the black hitchhiker, the victim of Vladek’s bigotry, himself speaks an English that, in its idiosyncrasy and visual effect, approximates the foreign English that defines Vladek’s authoritative voice as a survivor.

On one level, Maus celebrates English. By displaying its heroic capacity to transform and pacify the most adverse conditions, Maus conveys a sense of the unlimited power of English, of its almost magical potency, even of its

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harboring the secret of life and death. Seemingly, English can master anything it confronts, can dominate whatever demands subjection. This celebration would seem to authorize English as a language of testimony, investing it with the knowledge and power to chronicle the events of the Holocaust with unparalleled eloquence. This glorification of English would likely confirm what American readers of the late twentieth century believe about the language they—or their neighbors—speak.

On another level, however, Maus tells a story about limitations, and particularly about the limitations of English as a language of the Holocaust. Maus inscribes these limits ironically, designating fluency, competence, and mastery as relative and questionable accomplishments. The very capacity to use words well often becomes the ironic sign of blindness and coercion. Significantly, Maus enforces the limitations of English by representing as authoritative an English that is uniquely broken, incompetent, unmasted. Indeed, the only English by which to tell “a survivor’s tale” is one that is singularly foreign. Such a repositioning of English would seem to go against expectations of an American audience, asking them, asking us, to question the fantasy—one that Maus itself rehearses—that English can know and master everything, even the Holocaust.

Notes

I am grateful to Ruth Clements, Jorg Drewitz, Nancy Harrowitz, and Herbert Levine for their reading of and comments on this manuscript at various stages.

1. Ezrahi’s more recent views pertaining to language and the Holocaust can be found in several essays, including “The Grave in the Air: Unbound Metaphors in Post-Holocaust Poetry” (in Friedlander, Probing the Limits 259–76) and “Conversation in the Cemetery: Dan Pagis and the Prosaics of Memory” (in Hartman, Holocaust Remembrance 121–33).

2. Although the anthology contains writing from 1942 to 1963, it was first published in 1968, with additional printings appearing regularly through the 1970s. The anthology thus came into circulation at approximately the same time Spiegelman was working on and eventually publishing his first cartoons representing the Holocaust.

3. It is, I think, fairly clear that by deploying the German word for the title, Spiegelman is asking the reader to view the Jews/mice through the Germans’/cats’ eyes, a strategy that emphasizes both Jewish weakness and vulnerability and German power and ruthlessness. The strategy of the title parallels and reinforces the visual animal metaphor. The appropriateness of this metaphor has been the subject of substantial critical contention.

That said, I believe that the reading I give the title, emphasizing the interplay between English and German, can be further supported by noting that whereas Spiegelman’s choice of the singular, Maus, enables the play between English and German, the choice of the plural, Mause, would not. And yet it is probably more fitting that the title (like the image of the mice on the cover) be in the plural. I therefore suggest that, at least in part, Spiegelman opted for the singular to invoke the play between the two languages. I would like to thank Jorg Drewitz for drawing my attention to the singular/plural issue.


5. By the phrase “language of survival” I am referring to the startling capacity of English as represented in Maus to determine survival during the Holocaust. This connotation is not synonymous with that of Sander Gilman in Jewish Self-Hatred.

6. As Vladek makes clear in the transcripts, his English was merely good enough: “And I, I was a teacher in English. Here I couldn’t be, of course. But there I gave lessons.” Spiegelman, “The Working Transcripts,” in The Complete Maus.

7. See Kachru, The Other Tongue. The term refers to the English of non-native speakers.

8. Vladek notes in the transcripts that “Willie” properly translates the Polish “Wladek.” Clearly, then, Willie was not a name chosen by the Americans simply in order to signal superiority. But since Spiegelman does not make the reader of Maus aware of the connection between the English and Polish names, the context, gestures, and language suggest the racial overtones.

9. As Alice Yaeger Kaplan phrases it, “One of the many extraordinary features of Maus is that Spiegelman gets the voices right, he gets the order of the words right, he manages to capture the intonations of Eastern Europe spoken by Queens” (“Theweleit and Spiegelman” 155).

10. To be sure, Maus represents a range of languages foreign to English: Hebrew, Polish, Yiddish, German, French. Whereas Vladek’s Yiddish-English functions to estrange the reader, these other languages generally do not function so as to insist on
their own foreignness; Spiegelman uses words so common to even non-speakers that they do not need translation, or, in the case of Vladek’s Polish, he subtitles it with fluent English. The Hebrew that appears in Maus, to my mind, has a more ambiguous status; I hope to address its significance in a longer version of this essay.

Felman uses a similar metaphor of “foreignness” in analyzing Lanzmann’s Shoah in “The Return of the Voice,” and I am indebted to her discussion therein. Yet Spiegelman and Lanzmann pursue this notion by means of contrasting strategies. Whereas Lanzmann foregrounds the foreignness of the Holocaust by making sure multiple survivors speak in languages (native or adopted) different from one another and different from the narrative language of the film itself (French), Spiegelman makes this foreignness palpable through the voice of a single survivor whose testimony is in the same language as the narrative of the graphic novel.

While significant in its own right, Spiegelman’s representation of Vladek’s accent falls within the context and conventions of Yiddish voices in American literature, a point apparently overlooked by most critics. For a summary of this context and these conventions see Hellerstein.

In the early 1950s, Alain Resnais employed this strategy in his film Night and Fog.

Considering Maus

Approaches to Art Spiegelman’s “Survivor’s Tale” of the Holocaust

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The editor dedicates this collection to the memory of her father, Norman W. Geis, for his bravery in World War II and in all things thereafter.