

**MY MIND AND MEMORY:
AN EXPLORATION OF HISTORY,
NARRATIVE, AND STORY IN THE WORK OF
PRIMO LEVI AND ART SPIEGELMAN**

by

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Bachelor of Arts, Simon Fraser University, 1998

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ABSTRACT

This thesis attempts to frame some of the fundamentals by which we tell and preserve *history, narrative, and story*. The exploration seeks to understand the necessity and complexity of the preservation of memory and the creation of narrative and story.

Culture may be understood as a collection of narratives to which we all contribute. Understanding ourselves requires an understanding of how and why we create *history, narrative, and story*.

Two Holocaust narratives of paramount cultural, social, and literary importance are investigated – writer Primo Levi's *If This Is A Man* and artist Art Spiegelman's *Maus*. Two very different ways of telling and preserving stories about the Holocaust have had great impact upon Western culture, and Cultural and Holocaust studies. These stories have raised lasting questions on morals and ethics that arise out of extreme circumstances.

By framing these works within my own personal narrative, my family's story (over three generations) and narrative theory, I have attempted to personalize and more deeply understand the construction of narrative and the relationship between *writer, artist, and memory*, and the larger relationship to history, narrative, and story.

Keywords: Primo Levi; Art Spiegelman; If This is a Man; Maus; Holocaust memoirs

Subject Terms: Narrative; memory; storytelling; Communication Studies, Cultural Studies

DEDICATION



I dedicate this work to my great Aunt Annie (1912-1948)
– the first teacher in my family.

I also dedicate this work to my wife Sheila, who has been a great source of inspiration in my life, and the lives of many others. I would never have been able to undertake the demands of a graduate program without her understanding. I will forever cherish the stories *we have written together*. She has made me a better person, and for that, I am forever grateful.

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“He who has a thousand friends has not a friend to spare.” – Ali ibn-Abi-Talib.

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CHAPTER 1: HISTORY, NARRATIVE AND STORY

Of Mind and Memory

Memory is not only a depository at the service of the understanding that fixes the objects and the laws beneath the surface patterns that pass. There is also a memory of the surfaces, of the shadows, the reflections, the patterns, the masks, the vortices and the rapids in the river of time of endurance and vulnerability. This memory is the form of consolation, not of one who retains their forms for himself, but of one who accompanies them in their impermanence. One has to remember. – Alphonso Lingis

I remember hearing about how my great, great grandfather, Mefody Matveyenko, emigrated to Canada in 1899. I know this story because my father told me about it many times when I was growing up. My father knows the story because his father, and grandfather, told him. I recall as a child, listening to my father tell me about ships and passports and trains and a log house in the midst of the vast Canadian prairies. The tales of wheat fields and trap lines, of hunting, harvest and homesteading, seemed to me, an entirely different world – which of course it was. My vivid imagination would create a world of golden motion – the waves of wheat fields undulating in the long, hot summer days – and of the barren, frozen landscapes that winter would blow in. It seemed to me a life of contrast – of beauty and hardship – and sometimes I wondered why Mefody ever came to Canada in the first place. But that's another story.

Like many families, our numbers are many and spread across this country, and several others. My father was raised in a small rural town in Saskatchewan and had a much different experience with his family, and

community, than I did as a child. As the eldest of four children, my father grew up in a larger family than I did. He had dozens of extended family members living within a 15 miles radius of the family farm. Grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins – all were an integral part of his upbringing, and all shared in his life from an early age. My father grew up with a sense of family and community that I have never known. The weekly trek into town on a Saturday, the evening meal, birthdays, weddings, funerals – these were events all shared by a close-knit group of family members and friends.

And in this way of life, before television, long before the digital age, my father often listened with delight as his grandfather, Mefody's eldest son Mike, told him stories about coming to Canada. As a young man at the turn of the 20th century, my great, grandfather Mike, was in his early 20s when he followed Mefody's footsteps to Canada. The closest neighbour my father's family shared was with an uncle – he too was an avid storyteller – and my father spent countless hours listening to his tales. So the stories of my family have been passed down through the generations, and now to me from my father. Still today, my uncles, aunts, great uncles and great aunts all have a story to tell. At a recent family wedding I was regaled with stories about rural life on the farm in the 40s and 50s, along with more recent anecdotes from BC, Alberta and Ontario. It's the same with other families – people tell stories – it's how they make sense of themselves and the world in which we live. Our narratives keep us anchored, without them we are endlessly adrift on a sea of meaningless and disconnected moments in time.

My father understands the significance of his stories, as they make up the history of his family – of my family – from his perspective. My mother too shares this understanding, as her family also emigrated from their homeland to arrive in the Canadian prairies – her grandparents lived approximately 50 kilometres from my father’s grandparents long before the two of them ever met. The parallels on both sides of my family are the timeless tales of the immigrant experience in Canada during the early 1900s. More than a decade ago my father realized that his family history, an oral history, would not last forever. Nor would his memories of this collective past. As our family becomes ever more scattered around the country and globe, there are fewer opportunities to share the *myths* and stories of our family with one another. And while it is far easier now than ever before to stay connected with people, wherever they might live, it too is sometimes harder. Several years ago it was decided that a crash course in genealogy was necessary, and my father began an extensive tracing and retracing of the steps that brought my great, great grandfather to Pier 21 in Nova Scotia in the autumn of 1899.

The construction of a history, a narrative, a story, was underway, and it was when my father asked me to assist him, that I began to see and understand the idea of history, narrative, story in a new way. In the summer of 2003 my father’s family held a reunion on the farm where he and his two brothers and sister had all been born and had grown up. Family members from coast to coast arrived on the Canada Day long-weekend and spent several days together – laughing, meeting, and above all telling stories. My father had been piecing

together the genealogy of his family for many years, and had decided to construct a first-person narrative around it. He then decided to produce a slim print volume as a memento to be given out on that special weekend. I was privileged to work closely with my father, in person and from a distance, for many, many months preceding the family reunion.

I had long known that history is constructed and reconstructed, almost exclusively in hindsight. The potential problem with hindsight is that is that we often need to rely upon memory, as well as supporting documents and evidence, to piece together an event or series of events. And while documents and documentary evidence are generally reliable, they too can be flawed or incomplete. Our memories – individually and collectively – are not always black and white. Memories, and therefore storytelling and the preservation of stories, is somewhat elastic – incongruous – if nothing else, memory is certainly subjective. No story, or history, can contain *all* of the facts or details. One person simply cannot ever have all of the details of an event, even when working collaboratively and deliberately. In the end, the historian, the narrator, the storyteller, decides what to leave in and what to leave out. Knowledge itself is a generalization. If we didn't generalize, we wouldn't be able to discuss anything at all. We would be paralyzed by the amount of information and detail that exists on any given

subject or event¹. So we make assumptions – about ourselves and our audiences – we make generalizations. No one will ever have a complete picture, so we fill in the gaps (create transitions and hypotheses), we make the story interesting (embellish certain aspects), and history is made.

As participants and agents in our own lives...we are forced to swim with the events and take things as they come. We are constrained by the present and denied the authoritative, retrospective point of view of the story-teller. Thus the real difference between 'art' and 'life' is not organization versus chaos, but rather the absence in life of that point of view which transforms events into stories by telling them. Narrative requires narration; and this activity is not just a recounting of events but a recounting informed by a certain kind of superior knowledge. This point is related to the distinction, long standard in the philosophy of history, between narrative and chronicle: the chronicler simply describes what happens in the order in which it happens. The narrator, by contrast, in virtue of his retrospective view, picks out the most important events, traces the causal and motivational connections among them, and gives us an organized, coherent account. (Carr, 1986, p. 59).

History, Narrative and Story: My Mind and Memory

One has to remember. I worked for many years at the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre (VHEC) – a remarkable anti-racism education centre that develops and delivers community programs and public exhibits of the highest calibre. A small staff and a multitude of hard working and dedicated volunteers became an inspiration to me, in many aspects of my life. During my

¹ “All the time we are aware of millions of things around us – these changing shapes, these burning hills, the sound of the engine, the feel of the throttle, each rock and weed and fence post and piece of debris beside the road – aware of these things but not really conscious of them unless there is something unusual or unless they reflect something we are predisposed to see. We could not possibly be conscious of these things and remember all of them because our mind would be so full of useless details we would be unable to think. From all of this awareness we must select, and what we select and call consciousness is never the same as the awareness because the process of selection mutates it. We take a handful of sand from the endless landscapes of awareness around us and call that handful of sand the world.” (Pirsig, 2005, p. 79).

time with the organization I learned a great deal, along with some of the most important lessons of my life. My time there will never be forgotten – my time there is forever committed to memory. During my term spent within a community of like-minded and devoted colleagues, I was especially affected by the deep commitment of the many Holocaust survivors I was so fortunate to meet and by those that I befriended. I came to realize that the personal stories of the survivors were not only stories to be relayed to their families, friends and confidantes – but that their stories transcended time and place and are stories about the human condition. The lessons from our past are truly relevant in our present, and therefore to our future. I was amazed time and again how survivor speakers could retell, and relive the horrors of their experiences in front of students and other audiences. Holocaust survivors told their stories at the Holocaust centre, in high schools, at symposiums, conferences, and many other venues. Their unflinching belief that their tales of terror, tragedy and ultimately survival, could be used to instruct, inform and educate a new generation, was (and is) nothing short of astonishing and inspirational. Stories of Holocaust survival changed *and* change lives – the stories changed my life – and I came to understand the tremendous power of narrative in a new way.

It was also during my time at the VHEC that my father and I worked together very closely on previously mentioned ‘family history’ documentation project. While I immediately acknowledge that it was a very different project, on a very different scale and scope, I was reminded of Art Spiegelman working with his father Vladek, and their time spent together as Spiegelman was writing *Maus*.

Without discrediting my own father's story, the stakes were obviously nowhere near as high as Spiegelman's challenge and choice of format. I merely recognized myself in a similar role – I saw myself in Spiegelman's story. I could relate to his work and his experience in a new way after working closely with my father.

The framework through which my project is informed highlights history, narrative, and story. **History** is not just the facts or the body of information and detail produced and documented by individuals. History provides a context and 'sense' of the situation or event being documented, discussed and explored – the time and the place. One can find and provide verification within history. **Narrative** is the literary structure used to explore history. In all of its forms – poetry, prose, oral history – narrative presents a human dynamic and provides a framework for the 'telling' of a story. **Story**, as it is being told, is the personal point of view. My story, your story, all stories are the places where storytellers reveal themselves to us. Then we too, insert ourselves back into the story, a place where we can see ourselves and relate to what we are reading, seeing, hearing. The act of listening is of great importance in its connection to history, narrative, and story. Without the ability to listen – without a listener – a story literally falls upon deaf ears. And the act of writing history or narrative is ultimately first about listening – about finding, hearing the details – about revealing the *story* within the findings. We all must listen if we are to learn from our histories, narratives and stories.

What will be explored is an overview and analysis of narrative and memory – in particular how our preservation, documentation, construction and

emphasis of history, narrative and story functions. In short, how our personal and cultural narratives are documented, and how they shape and form our histories, and why we believe in and need our stories. I have chosen two works for analysis based on their importance within our culture, not only as Holocaust narratives, but also as exemplary texts in the genre of narrative and storytelling. Texts can tell us who we are: they reveal history, narratives, stories.

In terms of exploring definitive works from the 20th century, two key narratives on the Holocaust will be examined, Primo Levi's *If This is a Man*, and Art Spiegelman's *Maus*. These two narratives tell similar stories, inasmuch as they are both documents about the Second World War, the Holocaust, and both are the personal stories of concentration camp survivors. From two different, yet similar vantage points, Primo Levi tells his story of survival in Auschwitz and Art Spiegelman retells the story of his father, Vladek, and about how he, Vladek, and his wife Anja, managed to survive the horrors of the concentration camps – again Auschwitz. Neither writers are historians as such, though their stories are born of historical events, they are narrators and storytellers, not historians. They were also both *listeners* – Levi listened to his fellow prisoners, to his captors, to himself – Spiegelman listened closely to his father.

There is much that separates these two narratives – again, such as form. Levi's document has come to be known and regarded as a literary masterpiece of 20th century literature, and Spiegelman's work, a graphic novel – though a Pulitzer Prize winning work – is often referred to as a 'comic book'. Another key difference is that Levi's telling is first person narrative, as an observer from inside

of Auschwitz, his story is told through his eyes, from his point of view. Other characters are part of the narrative, but they are seen through Levi's lens of experience. Spiegelman is a member of the second generation (children of Holocaust survivors) and his story is as much about himself, living in New York, as it is about his father and mother – Vladek and Anja. These two works are also separated by time, space, and psychic and physical geography. Levi wrote just two short years after the Second World War, in a world still reeling from the destruction and chaos that had engulfed most of Europe. Spiegelman started documenting his narrative in various comic strips in the early 1970s, and his use of the comic book art form immediately separated his work from all others who had written Holocaust narratives.

The approaches of Levi and Spiegelman are very different, but ultimately they are extremely gifted storytellers and documentarians. Both Levi and Spiegelman created *new ways* of telling stories. These two documents have both had enormous social and cultural impact – not just within Holocaust studies. It was during my time at the VHEC that I came to fully recognize the importance of these two very different narratives, and I have since recognized that they are extremely relevant texts from the 20th century that exemplify both the great importance and cultural impact that narrative can have. Levi is a respected and honoured literary figure, and a gifted writer without compare. His contributions to the field of literature is enormous – and his work has spanned the genres of non-fiction, fiction, science fiction, and of course autobiography. Spiegelman is a renowned comic historian, artist, curator, and author. He has more than earned

the respect of his peers and is a leading authority in the world of graphic novels, comics and their place within popular culture.

I acknowledge the complexity that surrounds issues of Holocaust representation. My intent within this exploration is to investigate two well known Holocaust texts, that have become synonymous within the genres of Holocaust narrative, and have become deeply entrenched as works of literature and art within popular culture. Both Levi and Spigelman have created compelling narratives that have entered the sphere and psyche of 20th century art and literature. My goal is to highlight these two very different forms of narrative and to situate them within our present culture, and within narrative and storytelling.

My goal is also to illustrate how these works have affected me personally. In the way that “Samuel Beckett...said: Every word is like an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness.” (Hungerford, 1999, p. 119). Levi was perhaps the first to break the silence of the Holocaust, with his story of internment in Auschwitz. There is a poetic beauty to Beckett’s words, but that in itself presents a dichotomy. There is a beauty, a peace, within silence and nothingness, and there is a time to marvel in that space. But the beauty and relevance of Beckett’s words cannot be known or understood until they are spoken (or written, read or heard), in which case the stain reveals itself. Thus, there too is beauty in the stain. It is inarguable that there is a time for silence, and a time for words. Primo Levi chose a time for words – he had to speak. “Certainly, I could have killed myself or got myself killed; but I wanted to survive, to avenge myself and bear witness.” (Levi, 1989, p. 53). Levi chose to exist. There are countless poems,

stories, narratives – countless words – that have enriched our lives. In order to do so, they must *exist*, they must be spoken, written, read; someone has to write them, someone has to bear witness to the event. The research and investigation that gave birth to this project started as a study of the meaning of *effective* and *persuasive* communication and the accuracy of history. In asking those initial and basic questions – what is effective communication and how accurate is history? – I have been led into the study of memory – of history, narrative, story and their construction.

By examining the work of Levi and Spiegelman, my intention is to investigate examples of narrative and storytelling that have had significant cultural impact, and that have also become known as classic texts in the storytelling genre, and which too, have become historical documents of sorts. It should be noted that these two works present some difficulty when trying to place them into specific genres or cultural ‘boxes’. Both works were controversial when they were first published, both had to ‘prove’ themselves and undergo close examination and scrutiny. Levi’s first edition sold poorly and was not well received – there wasn’t much of an audience for Holocaust narratives at the time. Spiegelman faced criticism for producing a comic book about the Holocaust. But both authors have come to be accepted as powerful and important writers: these narratives have crossed boundaries and genres to become more than the sum of their parts. At times the plight of the European Jewry during the Holocaust is viewed in very specific terms – a Jewish genocide, the rise of German fascism, the historical analysis of the Second World War – but the narratives from Levi

and Spiegelman bring the context right down to the individual. Their stories are our stories, whether we are Jews, Germans, Canadians, young, old, these narratives are part of our culture and they document and illuminate our collective past.

At the same time, I have chosen to illustrate the importance of my own narrative – my own story – into these pages: in doing so I have been able to apply the discoveries from my research to my own experience. I found that there were many places in the research that mirrored my own life, in the way that I have come to define my personal story. In drawing from my own, and my family's history, I have come to more fully understand the ideas of *history*, *narrative* and *story* – and the delicate, sometimes difficult, balance between them – as well as the threads of narrative that bind them all together. Our minds, our memories, are the repositories of all that we *know*, all that we *think* we know. It is really a study of human psychology, of the human psyche, about how and why we remember the things that we do, and how and why we choose to tell the stories that we do – what becomes documented, and thus what becomes history. “We are, as Claude Lévi-Strauss remarks, *bricoleurs*, improvisers. We improvise in how we tell ourselves to ourselves, improvise in the interest of keeping our investment in our balance from getting undone.” (Bruner, 2003, p. 100).

Stories have always been told and documented, the stories of our memories. Histories – both oral and literate – have always been documented in one form or another. The history of a people is constituted by both fact and fiction – it's how to document our past – our *selves*, and our *place* within a narrative.

But what does history owe us, and those who will come after? When embarking upon the project of documenting history, or particular events from history, what responsibility does each of us hold? As historians, narrators, storytellers – there is held a responsibility – to ourselves, to one another, and to future generations. That responsibility is to preserve history as accurately and truthfully as possible. However *truth* too, is an elusive ideal, and it escapes each of us daily, at the very least it is shadowed by the greyness of the world in which we live. “Only when we suspect that we have the wrong story do we begin asking how narrative may structure (or distort) our view of how things really are. And eventually we ask how story, *eo ipso*, shapes our experience of the world.” (Bruner, 2003, p. 9).

That is not to say that history is false, or even ‘over’, as some have claimed, but it does suggest that there exists a multiplicity to the idea of, and concept of ‘truth’ – and therefore history – of what we perceive and believe to be historically true. Narratives, stories, and memories shape tales and myths – the various histories of many societies. History existed in the oral tradition long before the written word, and there were those who believed the written word was a danger to the memory of individuals. Memory was to be trusted, because it came from within, from personal experience – and it was shared amongst those who were willing to listen and learn. The written word seemed to open the door to falsehood and fallacy, and it meant that individuals no longer had to contain their memories – thus making them easier to forget.

Point of view and perspective have always been at odds with the description of events and the ‘eyewitness account’ of any unfolding action. Two

or more people observing the same event will have two or more versions of what happened – neither is *necessarily* right or wrong, individual perspective comes into account – each recollection can be as different as they are similar. “Judges know this very well: almost never do two eyewitnesses of the same event describe it in the same way and with the same words, even if the event is recent and if neither of them has a personal interest in distorting it.” (Levi, 1989, p. 1). Our lives run rife with ambiguity – and we accept that – there are always exceptions to the rule. “To be modern is to live a life of paradox and contradiction.” (Berman, 1982, p. 13). How many times has any one of us recalled an anecdote amongst friends, that we believed to be unshakingly true – this *is* what happened – only to be reminded of a key detail that we had forgotten. Suddenly the story has changed. ‘Oh, I forgot about that, you’re absolutely right. Sorry, I guess I was wrong.’ Right up until we are reminded or corrected, in our memory, we are unfaltering in our belief. It’s what I remember. It’s definitely what happened. Personal experience and individual past are always shaping and reshaping present and future memories.

Our lives and our memories are constantly shaped and reshaped by our present – and the experiences of the present continue to shape and reshape our past. The past and present continue to shift between themselves in ways that we may not ever fully understand. Our memories are both voluntary and involuntary. Marcel Proust captured these ideas in his work and he tapped directly into the universality of the human condition when he revealed his views about voluntary

and involuntary memory². Still, there are exceptions to every rule, and even though nearly everyone can relate to Proustian memory, on some level, each one of us undoubtedly turns our experiences inward. Our memories become moments of solitude again, held, at times trapped, deep within ourselves.

Marcel Proust illuminates the confusion and ambiguity – the paradox and contradiction – of our memories in the opening pages of *In Search of Lost Time*, the main character Marcel reflects:

I could not even be sure at first who I was; I had only the most rudimentary sense of my existence, such as may flicker in the depths of an animal's consciousness; I was more destitute than the cave dweller; but then the memory – not yet of the place in which I was, but of various other places where I had lived and might now very possibly be – would come like a rope let down from heaven to draw me up out of the abyss of not-being, from which I could never have escaped by myself: in a flash I would traverse centuries of civilization, and out of the blurred glimpse of oil-lamps, then shirts with turned down collars, would gradually piece together the components of my ego. (Proust, 2003, pp. 4-5).

Our memories are trapped inside of time and space, inside ourselves.

Proust illuminates the delicate and fleeting nature of our being, and how fragile it becomes at times of (re)construction.

In the beginning there were words – those words moved onto the page – suddenly there was an ability to document history, narratives and stories. Time and space were compressed, made permanent. History was made, and we literally held in our hands, for the first time, documentation of a past that we had

² “Proustian memory is the instrument of [the] search for consciousness and experience and thus provides a way into a historical as well as philosophical questions—a question that Walter Benjamin, in his reading of Proust, identified with the word *Erlebnis*, or “lived experience.” Benjamin identified in Proustian memory the symptom of a shift of sensibility in our perception of the world and in the meaning of history.” (Ender, 2005, p. 6).

never known. How would that affect the present and the future – history, narratives, stories? I have been interested in the oral-literate divide as an entrance into the cultural transformation of memory – of history, narrative and story. My intention is to show how stories enter into our lives as an *imperative* and how that imperative has evolved.

CHAPTER 2: THE WORDS

In the Beginning There Were Words

To perceive is to find ourselves not supplied with sense data or objects but subjected in each thing to a reality in the interrogative mode, whose consistency and coherence weighs on us with a weight of the imperative. The imperatives in things, the imperatives things are... – Alphonso Lingis

I'm told that Mefody was a man of few words. His life was ultimately measured by his deeds. A pensive and thoughtful man, who was always there to lend a helping hand when a neighbouring farmer needed help – the cattle may have broken through the fence, a piece of farm equipment needed repair, or a nearby farm was short handed during the harvest. My great, great, grandfather received assistance from his adopted community when he arrived, very nearly empty handed, in Saskatchewan, and he never let that memory stray from his mind. He wasn't much of a storyteller, more of a man to bestow rural wisdom in the form of one-liners, upon his children from time to time – "You must harvest the crops, *before* you get hungry." He was most certainly not a writer. He was able to write, though not that well in his mother tongue, and hardly more than a few words, phrases, and his signature in English. His history was almost entirely oral, the way he communicated his thoughts and made himself known, and in the way he passed on his wisdom and taught his children the ways of the new world in Canada.

My great Aunt Annie was the first member of the family born in Canada to move beyond the life she knew growing up on the farm. Growing up as a farmer's daughter, she dreamt of more than marrying, children, and settling down on a nearby plot of land. She was a primary school teacher and loved her students and the books that held the knowledge of her past and future – as well as the future of her students. Annie never married, her life was dedicated to her career and her happiness was realized when she was teaching at her little schoolhouse – McGillivray School No. 2208 – near Kamsack, Saskatchewan.

Her father Mike often spoke about the value of education to his three children – Annie, Walter and Alex. In fact, my great grandfather Mike, so realized the importance of education that he donated the land where McGillivray School was first built. The first school stood from 1912-1931, at which time it burned to the ground. A second school was built and stood in the very same spot for another 31 years, until the numbers of local children finally outgrew the space in 1962.

Although Annie never married, I'm told there was a young man with whom she courted. He had potential in Annie's eyes, as a local businessman, he could offer her a life outside of the farm she knew growing up as a child and teen – however, Annie died tragically, at age 36. She never had the chance to pursue the relationship with her suitor beyond its very early stages. Still, I'm told, Annie never regretted putting her students first, and that teaching was indeed her first love and true passion. Her dedication to, and her quest for knowledge has been an inspiration to me throughout my lifetime. I believe she was happy with the

choices she made. She realized the value of education, and saw it as a privilege, something to be greatly appreciated and respected. As a teacher in the Canadian prairies, as with all teachers, she too was an orator and was immersed in the study of communication, though perhaps somewhat unknowingly. Her life was an example to her students, of which in some way, I too am one. Her short life was driven by imperatives – the imperatives for her to learn, for her to teach, and to foster education and communication.

The genesis of narrative and storytelling was birthed in the oral tradition – in signs and symbols – in imperatives. One cannot, *not* communicate, it is *imperative* that we do so – it is *the imperatives things are*. All individuals and beings must enter into the subtle, beautiful, at times treacherous, and extraordinary dance of communication – of the oral and the written – with ourselves and with others. The imperative of communication does not separate us from other forms of life, but language does. While other living creatures communicate on many levels through sight, sound and the use of all the senses, we are the only beings that have language – oral and literate. As societies were once only oral, nearly all civilizations and societies now have some form of literacy embedded within their modes of communication³. Some theories suggest that the shift from orality to literacy, was one of the most significant advances in modern societies. While the earliest forms of literacy were developed around the

³ It is not beyond possibility that societies still do exist today that have not developed *literacy* as part of their daily lives – that is the *written* word. As recently as 30 years ago anthropologist Jack Goody (whose work runs many parallels to that of Walter Ong) studied oral cultures in West Africa. (Briggs and Burke, 2007, pp. 10-11).

emergence of trade, commerce and enumeration⁴, the use of documented language radically changed and shaped the way in which we construct history, narrative and story, and gave some cultures the ability to fuse our histories, narratives and stories.

I am aware of the subtleties and the delicate balance that exists between the oral and literate divide. My goal is not to denigrate orality in favour of literacy, and certainly not to undermine the many and great and rigorous oral traditions of countless cultures and civilizations. Rather my objective is to observe how story struggles to find narrative form. Books do carry weight – the written word codifies and solidifies ideas in ways that the oral tradition did not. I am simply recognizing the difference in terms of the discussion here about history, narrative and story.

Since the print revolution spearheaded by Gutenberg along with the democratization of information that the printing press provided, books have become symbols of truth and correctness. The entire tradition of the Western academic institution is based upon reading, researching, writing – books provide the core source of validation for scholars in search of meaning and *truth*.⁵

⁴ “Aramaic script developed in relation to the demands of an extensive land trade for a concise conventional alphabet and possibly in relation to the use of papyrus. The Phoenician script was developed as a result of the demands of an extensive maritime trade...A flexible alphabet favoured the growth of trade, development of the trading cities of the Phoenicians, and the emergence of smaller nations dependent on distinct languages.” (Innis, 1995 p. 39).

⁵ As noted, this was not always the case. “In ancient Greece there is hardly an idea of the ‘sacredness of the book’, as there is no privileged priestly caste of scribes. Reading and writing were assigned to slaves in ancient Greece, and it was the Romans who promoted the book to a place of dignity. But essentially ‘it was through Christianity that the book received its highest consecration...[through the production] of new sacred writings.’ (McLuhan, 2004, pp. 180-181).

Though this was not always the case. It is perhaps Socrates, through the writings of Plato, who presented the earliest condemnation of the written word.

For this invention will produce forgetfulness in the minds of those who learn to use it, because they will not practice their memory. Their trust in writing, produced by external characters which are no part of themselves, will discourage the use of their own memory within them. You have invented an elixir not of memory, but of reminding; and you offer your pupils the appearance of wisdom, not true wisdom, for they will read many things without instruction and will therefore seem to know many things, when they are for the most part ignorant and hard to get along with, since they are not wise, but only appear wise. (Fowler, 1925, 275a).

Was Socrates correct? There is an argument to be made in his favour, but the world is a very different place today than it was in ancient Greece. There is a historical cartwheel that traces memory and the written word – the shift from oral to literate societies. The fact is that memories *are* words, our memories *are* books and texts – memory is deeply linked to our written texts and narratives. They are all *images* in our mind's eye. However flawed our memories might be, they are deeply connected to the words that make it onto the page. In a passage echoing Marshall McLuhan, Alexander John Watson, in his recent biography of Harold Innis, makes a similar point about memory and texts, at the same time displaying the sometimes inverse and complex relationship between memory and texts, and the technology of the 'word'.

Civilization advances through the invention of tools which substitute for human organs and bring...them to perfection. The book is an artificial memory. Before the invention of books, the memory played a much more important part than nowadays. [People] carried their libraries in their memory, and people with good memories were highly esteemed as living libraries, as the carriers of the sacred traditions. The chief task of education was to train, cultivate and

strengthen the memory...The development of the logical powers of the human mind weakens the memory. (Watson, 2007, p. 355).

There is a tremendous argument to be made that the written word⁶ – especially in terms of history, narrative and story – is indeed the single most revolutionary and influential technology that Western civilization has ever invented or created. However, words alone cannot document history or tell a story – we ultimately need *language*. Language, once it was formalized, has perhaps become the crowning glory of Western achievement. Thus the ability to write, to transcribe, to document, and to create, has certainly surpassed the wildest dreams of the earliest scribes. As much as societies are oral, they are infinitely more literate – the written word is that which wields the power – the power of persuasion – and more. Today the written word, the published text, is perhaps held in higher regard than ever before. Yet the written word and its authority presents a certain dichotomy unto itself – between truth and falsehood. The printed word can serve up duplicitous scenarios in the guise of truth by its author – irrespective of what may or may not be true (or false)⁷. Still, the written

⁶ “Until writing was invented, man lived in acoustic space: boundless, directionless, horizonless, in the dark of the mind, in the world of emotion by primordial intuition. Speech is a social chart of this bog.

The goose quill put an end to talk. It abolished mystery; gave architecture and towns; it brought roads and armies, bureaucracy. It was the basic metaphor with which the cycle of civilization began, the step from the dark into the light of the mind. The hand that filled the parchment page built a city.” (McLuhan, *The Medium is the Massage*, p. 48).

⁷ “Societies have always been shaped more by the nature of the media by which men communicate than by the content of the communication. The alphabet, for instance, is a technology that is absorbed by the very young child in a completely unconscious manner, by osmosis so to speak. Words and the meaning of words predispose the child to think and act automatically in certain ways. The alphabet and print technology fostered and encouraged a fragmenting process, a process of specialism and of detachment...It is impossible to understand social and cultural changes without a knowledge of the workings of media.” (McLuhan, 1967, p. 8).

word possesses an authority that it has earned in the past, however its credibility may stand upon shaky ground in the future. Just because we can read it, we can see it, doesn't make it true or even *truthful*. But the willingness to believe in the written word is cemented within our societies – so it is written, so it shall be – but is it any good?

What Makes a Good Story Good?

“Experience which is passed from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn. And among those who have written down the tales, it is the great ones whose written version differs least from the speech of the many nameless storytellers.” (Benjamin, 1968, p. 84)⁸. There is something inherent in a good story. The elements that constitute a good story are usually agreed upon by most: there are protagonists, antagonists, heroes, anti-heroes, plots, twists, initial incidents, cliff-hangers, denouements, and so on. But what makes a good story, *good*? What makes a story enduring and why are some stories better than others? Ultimately it is the difference between mere facts and narrative – the telling of the tale – that creates a good story and longevity.

It may be seen what the nature of true story-telling is. The value of information does not survive the moment in which it was new. It

⁸ It should be noted that Benjamin too, in the same essay, *The Storyteller*, spoke about the loss of experience. “Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly...It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences. One reason for this phenomenon is obvious: experience has fallen in value...With the [First] World War a process began to be apparent which has not halted since. Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent – not richer, but poorer in terms of communicable experience?...For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power.” (Benjamin, 1968, pp. 83-84).

lives only at that moment; it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself to it without losing any time. A story is different. It does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time. (Benjamin, 1968, p. 90).

There are obviously some common threads, themes, and devices that capture our minds – individually and collectively. But how much of a good story is fact, and how much is fiction? Over time, as individuals, we tend to recall the ‘big picture’ moments, and then fill in the gaps with something that sounds, or seems, credible. We fill in the gaps within our own minds, as we construct our personal narratives. “The further events fade into the past, the more the construction of a convenient truth grows and is perfected.” (Levi, 1989, p. 27). These stories are told to others: the stories take on an external life of their own. All of us have made up elements, or details, when recalling a story – the ‘new’ information then becomes part of the narrative. The elements become part of the story – they become *true*. “What sticks to memory, often, are those odd little fragments that have no beginning and no end.” (O’Brien, 1998, p. 36). These are the moments that often seem important, the things we recall, the things we know that others who were there, will also remember. The rest – the beginnings and the ends – we can fill in, make up, (re)construct. No one will remember the little details, or will they? The human mind is nothing short of remarkable, and our ability to recall, and remember things from our past allows us to identify with our present selves in ways that give us our conception of time and space. It’s very nearly impossible for us to imagine ourselves without memory – seeing the world anew – as a goldfish circles its bowl. With the shift from oral to literate society, the

technology of writing changed our relationship to memory – history, narrative and story – forever. As suggested, writing may very well be the single most influential technology that has ever been invented. Its impact has affected all aspects of life – the way we think, remember, act, even the ways in which we *believe*.

There is a delicate balance sought between memory and history that I find within the work of Levi and Spiegelman. Paul Ricoeur, a French philosopher who has done much investigation into memory and history, suggests the following:

The competition between memory and history, between the faithfulness of the one and the truth of the other, cannot be resolved on the epistemological plane. In this respect, the suspicion instilled by the myth of the *Phaedrus* – is the *pharmakon* of writing a poison or a remedy? – has never been dispelled on the gnoseological plane. It was reawakened in Nietzsche's attacks against the abuses of historical culture. A final echo resounded in the testimony of some prominent historians regarding the 'uncanniness of history'. The debate must be transferred to another arena, that of the reader of history, which is also that of the educated citizen. It is up to the recipients of the historical text to determine, for themselves and on the plane of public discussion, the balance between memory and history. (Ricoeur, 2004, pp. 498-499).

Hegel stated: "The pallid shades of memory struggle in vain with the life and freedom of the Present." (Hegel, 2001, p. 20). From Hegel to Ricoeur, and a long line of thinkers in between, many have explored the difficulty that exists in performing 'memory work'.

In an essay entitled 'The Memory and the Offense' (1989), Levi explores what he calls the 'marvelous but fallacious instrument' of memory. He argues that memory is our sole link to the past, but it is also an imperfect way to access the past, particularly when memories surface around personal trauma. He writes that 'a person who has been wounded tends to block out the memory so as not to renew the pain'. In the case of many survivors, then, memory sometimes works against their intentions to retell their experiences.

Levi is the rare survivor [and writer] who is attuned to the limitations of memory – including his own. (Versaci, 2007, p. 90).

We are always working backwards with memory, that is its challenge. 'If memory serves me...' – and yet it *does not* always serve us. When memory fails, we fill in the gaps, we create a story. It doesn't mean it's not true, not factual – but perhaps some things are left out. We create a story. If it's a good story, it may be remembered, at least for a while.

What is the form of a good story? A good story needs good rhetoric⁹ – *rhetorike*, the Greek word rooted in the word *techne* – technology (ie. language). Rhetoric, the *art* of using *language*, today often means a series of seemingly endless and meaningless words and sentences strung together in the way that politicians might make hollow campaign speeches. Originally, *rhetorike*, was used to describe the ability to *move*, *persuade*, *hold*, and *deliver* information, words, *and* emotion to an audience. How better to pursue this objective than through words, through a story?

The best and most memorable words spoken throughout documented history, have *almost* always been laid upon the page. There is perhaps nothing that has survived (for very long) in our culture as *only* oral history. If we know it now, in the present, it undoubtedly exists somewhere on a page. From the epic poems of Homer to the histories of Herodotus, a shift was made from the oral to the literate. In poetry, philosophy, science, if it bears repeating or thinking about, it is written. Great words from history have been transcribed, or today we would

⁹ "Rhetoric is an art, and when rightly practised and honest and useful art...[it is] defined as the faculty (power) of discovering in the particular case what are the available means of persuasion. This is the function of no other art." (Cooper, 1960, p. 7).

likely not know them. Words on a page can be flat and lifeless, and at times need an orator to give voice to the text, to make it *sing*. However, a good writer, a wordsmith, is also be able to evoke emotion and sway an audience – often a much larger audience can be reached than the one gathered physically to hear a live speaker – words can reach beyond a gathering of listeners, and *words* can become permanent in a way that *speech* alone cannot. Good rhetoric, great rhetoric, can hold power and possession over many, verbally and in written form – and ideally, they often work together. The power of a good rhetorician, a good storyteller is that, “In a good story...all the extraneous noise or static is cut out. That is, we the audience are told by the story-teller just what is necessary to ‘further the plot.’” (Carr, 1986, p. 57). The plot of good rhetoric is whatever is being ‘sold’ that day, in that moment. And the sway of a good storyteller – a politician, a salesman, a spiritual leader – can always bring someone home; home being the end goal of the speaker. Did we vote for the correct party, did we buy the car or computer, and did we get right with god? What to leave in, what to leave out, the power to connect with an audience emotionally, to hold the attention of the audience, to persuade the audience, this in effect, is what makes a storyteller great, instead of simply good. The power of well constructed narrative makes a good story, good.

Why do we use story as the form for telling about what happens in life, in our own lives? Why not images, or lists of dates and places and the names and qualities of our friends and enemies? Why this seemingly innate addiction to story? Beware an easy answer! Even etymology warns ‘to narrate’ derives from both ‘telling’ (*narrare*) and ‘knowing in some particular way’ (*gnarus*) – the two tangled beyond sorting.

For one thing, narrative gives us a ready and supple means for dealing with the uncertain outcomes of our plans and anticipations...Aristotle noted, the impetus to narrative is expectation gone awry – *perpeteia* as [he] called it. Expectation is a characteristic of living beings, though it varies in sophistication and in the reach of time it encompasses. (Bruner, 2003, pp. 27-28).

It should be noted that a good story, a persuasive story, good rhetoric can also find success in the hands of someone who wants to convince a person or group of people to act in a manner or believe something that is wrong, questionable or even evil. Like many inventions and technologies, words can be used to pursue both good and evil ends. An axe may be used to split wood, to build a fire for warmth or cooking, but the very same axe can also be used as a weapon to harm another. It can be used for protection or to maim and kill. Relationships with technology can be positive, negative, or somewhere in the middle – a grey zone. It too is the same with words, rhetoric and stories. The same rhetorical and literary devices that can rally a group of citizens to act in a positive manner can be used to dupe individuals or convince them to harm others, or themselves. A text or story can also be interpreted in more than one way and while the intent of the author may have been one thing, others might choose to distort the story and use it for destructive purposes.¹⁰ *To be modern is to live a life of paradox and contradiction.*

¹⁰ See footnote 23 on page 52.

What Makes a Good Story Narrative?

What is a story – what is narrative – and how are they constructed in order to make sense? How do we arrange the pieces of an everyday life, into something that can first be understood by another, and second, evoke meaning?

There is no such thing as *just a story*. A story is always charged with meaning, otherwise it is not a story, merely a sequence of events...And we can be sure that if we know a story well enough to tell it, then it carries meaning for us...some stories are unjustly forgotten, but no stories are unjustly remembered. They do not survive through the vagaries of whim.” (Fulford, 1999, p. 6).

We tell stories – to our friends, our families, and to ourselves. Stories are the glue that hold our lives together – it is narrative that strings events together and creates shape, form and meaning out of often seemingly unconnected moments.

We should not write off [the] power of story to shape everyday experience as simply another error in our human effort to make sense of the world...Nor should we shunt it with the age-old dilemma as to whether and how epistemological processes lead to valid ontological outcomes (that is, with how mere experience gets you to true reality). In dealing with narrative reality, we like to invoke between ‘sense’ and ‘reference’, the former connotational, the latter denotational, we like to say that literary fiction does not refer to anything in the world but only provides the sense of things. Yet it is the sense of things often derived from narrative that makes later real-life reference possible. Indeed, we refer to events and things and people by expressions that situate them not just in an indifferent world but in a narrative one. (Bruner, 2003, pp. 7-8).

Jerome Bruner, professor of law and psychology at New York University and a groundbreaking theorist on narrative, draws attention to an essential and inherent link between ‘narrative’ and ‘real life’. Each of us constructs narrative each and every day. We tell stories about our place in the world, where we think

we'll be tomorrow, and about the short and long-term futures we design and outline for ourselves. We become 'real' through the stories we tell – to ourselves, and to each other. The 'sense of things' that Bruner notes is what is used to define ourselves in the world. Without a personal narrative, we are lost unto ourselves, and all that we know is also lost. Our sense of physical space and place is inextricably linked to the narrative structure we build. The way we see ourselves – the image we project to others – and then the ways in which we are perceived by others, is almost entirely constructed by ourselves, through our own stories about ourselves and our behaviours. We pick and choose what we 'believe' and thus what we want others to believe about us. At times constrained by actual events and at other times not. We design the story of our lives, through the act of telling it to ourselves and to others.

Doesn't the telling of something always become a story?

Perhaps in English. In Japanese a story would have an element of *invention* in it. We don't want any invention. We want the 'straight facts'."

The world isn't just the way it is. It is how we understand it, no?" And in understanding something, we bring something to it, no?" Doesn't that make life a story?...You want words that reflect reality?"...I know what you want. You want a story that won't surprise you. That will confirm what you already know. That won't make you see higher or further or differently. You want a flat story. An immobile story. You want a dry factuality. (Martel, pp. 335-336).

In my experience within the construction¹¹ of the stories one tells, whoever we are, and ultimately the history that is written, there exists a fine line between truth and fiction – or the terms we have come to know as fiction and non-fiction. There are many ways to get into, and out of, the narrative structure. Writers and storytellers must decide what devices they will utilize and in what ways to employ their chosen devices. Is the story real? By the nature of its existence, a story that is told or written down is ‘real’. It exists, therefore it is real – but does that make the story *true*?¹² This is a far more complex question, and can be answered from multiple perspectives. Let us first agree that ‘truth’ has long been an elusive ideal that has been sought through the various lenses of science, philosophy, religion, and so on. If truth exists as a universal ideal, in a perfect Platonic realm of being, it most certainly does not exist here, in our most imperfect world. The goals of the Enlightenment project have never been fully realized, and *truth* eludes and escapes us. Stories and myths are how we insert our *selves* into our *existence* – the two together – what does it mean to be true to these ideas, these stories, and does it matter? What really matters is what one believes. The Greeks called it

¹¹ “From narration, certain generalizations or abstract conclusions can be formulated. Behind proverbs and aphorisms and philosophical speculation and religious ritual lies the memory of human experience strung out in time and subject to narrative treatment...All of this is to say that knowledge and discourse come out of human experience and that the elemental way to process the human experience verbally is to give an account of it more or less as it really comes into being and exists, embedded in the flow of time. Developing a story line is a way of dealing with this flow.” (Ong, p. 137).

¹² “There may be some truth in that story, that tale, that discourse, that narrative, but there is no reliability in the telling of it. It was told forty years later by the ten-year-old who heard it, along with her great-aunt, by the campfire, on a dark and starry night in California; and though it is, I believe, a Plains Indian story, she heard it told in English by an anthropologist of German antecedents. But by remembering it he [the anthropologist] had made the story his; and insofar as I have remembered it, it is mine; and now, if you like it, it’s yours. In the tale, in the telling, we are all one blood. Take the tale in your teeth, then, and bite till the blood runs, hoping it’s not poison; and we will all come to the end together, and even to the beginning: living, as we do, in the middle.” (Le Guin, 1981, p. 195). Does that make the story *true*?

rethorhike, it became *rhetoric*, and today American, Vietnam veteran turned author, Tim O'Brien calls it *story truth*: "Right here, now, as I invent myself, I'm thinking of all I want to tell you about why this book is written as it is...I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth...What stories can do is make things present." (O'Brien, 1998, p. 180).¹³ And the present is all one really has, we tell stories, create myths – about our past – so that we can imagine and see ourselves and others, in an unknown future. Our lives are about our selves and how we see those selves in the mirror, about how we portray those selves to others, and the stories we make up in between. There is no room for 'truth' in this equation – truth, fiction, reality – we make it up in a way that makes sense to ourselves: even if we have to lie to ourselves and to others. O'Brien suggests that "writing must serve a higher purpose than merely recounting events. It must be true to the experience. 'You have to tell the truth in fiction, even if you have to lie'." (Kertes, 2006, p. 38).

Bruner similarly echoes the sentiment:

Great fiction proceeds by making the familiar and the ordinary strange again...by 'alienating' the reader from the tyranny of the compellingly familiar. It offers alternative worlds that put the actual one in a new light. Literature's chief instrument in creating this magic is, of course, language: its tropes and devices that carry our meaning-making beyond banality into the realm of the possible. It explores human plights through the prism of imagination. At its best and most powerful, fiction...is the end of innocence. (Bruner, p. 9).

¹³ "Prose writing can also call attention to the author's use of fictive devices. Though not a memoir per se, Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* is very much about the nature of 'constructed truth' in personal writing. In fact, one of the author's main points throughout the book is that 'story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth'. As O'Brien makes clear throughout this inventive collection, the stories that we create from the events can achieve a greater 'emotional truth' than those adhering strictly to the facts." (Versaci, 2007, p. 58).

He continues:

We know that stories are *made*, not *found* in the world. But we can't resist doubting it. Does art copy life, life art, or is it a two-way street? Even with fiction we wonder what a story is based on, as if it could not really be just made up... 'Fiction emphasizes the fact of the fictionality of a story... verisimilitude itself, therefore entails fictionality.' ... Narrative, then presents an ontological dilemma. Are stories real or imagined? How far have they leaped beyond our perception and memory of things in the world? And, indeed, are perception and memory yardsticks of the real, or are they artificers in the employ of convention? (Bruner, 2003, pp. 22-23).

We hear or read a good story, and at times wonder how much of it is *true*, how much is *real*. I wonder about this often while reading, and wonder what the words *true* and *real* have come to mean – to myself and to others. James Young, a Holocaust scholar and expert on memory work and memorialization, quotes contemporary author E.L. Doctorow: "There is no fiction or nonfiction as we commonly understand the distinction: there is only narrative." (Young, 1988, p. 51). Our personal narratives are really quite fragile, and while they are based upon reality, or what we recall (at times vehemently) from our memories, our memories are wont to change from time to time, year to year.

Human memory is a marvellous but fallacious instrument. This is the threadbare truth known not only to psychologists but also to anyone who has paid attention to the behaviour of those who surround him or even to his own behaviour. The memories which lie within us are not carved in stone; not only do they tend to become erased as the year go by, but often they change, or grow, by incorporating extraneous features. (Levi, 1989, p. 1).

Our memories change in relation to the stories we tell, every time we tell them. A 'fact' that we may embellish at first, soon becomes the unequivocal truth, and one comes to believe the words exiting their mouths as if they were written in history books. The fact is that at times this is how history comes to fruition – our

personal history, and the history of others – the history of our cultures. Eventually it is easy to believe the *stories* one tells oneself, if repeated often enough.

Language has the power to change the world. “Language does change reality. In [stories], language is constantly mutating and disappearing. The notion that when you change language you change reality is one of the basic principles of therapeutic analysis: the repressed returns in a context that is normal.” (Zaslove and Lowry, 2006, p. 254). And when we tell the same story, the ‘new story’ to our friends and families, if we speak with conviction, they too find it easy to believe and it becomes normalized.

Cultural critic, theorist, and literary scholar Walter Benjamin suggests that it is impossible for a storyteller to separate themselves from the tales they tell. We put ourselves into the story to make it believable, to make it ‘true’ to ourselves, and therefore true to others. At the same time the storyteller is constructing his or her identity within the story – the narrative – the narrative and the author become as one. For me, these are the stories of Levi and Spiegelman as they come to reveal memory, memoir, and myth:

Storytelling...is itself an artisan form of communication, as it were. It does not aim to convey the pure essence of the thing, like information or a report. It sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again. Thus traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel. (Benjamin, 1968, p. 92).

Memory, Memoir and Myth

“Memory has its own story to tell. Memoirists are not writing proper history but rather what they remember of it, or, more accurately, what they can’t forget.”

(Kertes, 2006, p. 39). How do we move then, from history to narrative to story – and from memory to history? “*Memory* is becoming history [and perhaps]... memory ends where history begins.” (Signorini, 2001, p. 189). Memory and history are inextricably linked to one another.¹⁴ How and where does one draw the line between memory and history – or fact and fiction? It would seem that the threads that bind memory and history together, are narratives. We have our memories, and we have the supporting evidence (corroborative accounts, supporting documents, documentary research and data), but it is the narrative structure that ties it all together. Stories can become legend and myth – the tales of the past that become the present – stories that are launched into an unwritten and unknown future.

For memory of the past is not merely passed down *mi dor le dor* – from generation to generation – but it is necessarily regenerated in the images that transport it from one era to the next. The past is thus recalled in present figures no less than contemporary events are refigured in light of past events. In this exchange between past and present, every generation simultaneously inherits and transmits memory – which now becomes in itself a series of analogues linking events to one another...In the end, reimagining contemporary and past historical crises – each in terms of the other – may ultimately be the only way we remember them. (Young, 1988, pp. 145-146).

Young suggests that collective memory is shaped and reshaped by each generation, and to some extent, by each individual. But more importantly, the past and present are impossible to disentangle. They are amorphously linked to

¹⁴ “Memory might be defined as the living recollection of an event and of an experience that accompanies those who have lived through it. History, on the other hand, is the resumption of a severed thread, of events seen impersonally, in the third person. Memory and history each have their own logic, although they can be intertwined: interiority and exteriority, first and third person.” (Signorini, 2001, p. 189).

one another. The past and present stumble over one another, as earlier noted in *Swann's Way*: "I could not even be sure at first who I was; I had only the most rudimentary sense of my existence...but memory – not yet of the place in which I was [the present], but of various other places... would come like a rope let down from heaven to draw me up out of the abyss. (Proust, 2003, pp. 4-5). Our memories provide the context for our selves, for our being, in the world, and our relationship to the world and those around us. By transmitting memory, as Young suggests, we are able to create context for others around us.

Memory creates the chain of tradition which passes a happening on from generation to generation. It is the Muse-derived¹⁵ element of the epic art in a broader sense and encompasses its varieties...It is, in other words, remembrance which...is added to reminiscence, the corresponding element in the story, the unity of their origin in memory having disappeared with the decline of the epic. (Benjamin, 1968, p. 98).

When we hear a story, when we tell a story, how we 'fit' into it, has much to do with how we tell it. How others fit into it, has everything to do with how they hear it. "The storyteller takes what he tells from experience – his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale." (Benjamin, 1968, p. 87). If we can't see ourselves in the picture, there is no way to relate to the words we hear or read. A good narrative provides common ground and insight into the human condition. "Myth [narrative], in its function as a revealer of truths and basic and hidden values, is the source

¹⁵ "Mnemosyne, the rememberer, was the Muse of the epic art among the Greeks." (Benjamin, 1968, p. 97).

of power and inspiration, the vehicle of coherence, the harbinger of an enduring present.” (Friedlander, 1984, p. 49).¹⁶

Embellishment, exaggeration, and hyperbole have always been a part of storytelling. Our language lends itself to overstatement – we talk about the weather ‘raining cats and dogs’, we were ‘flying down the road’, ‘I’ve told you a million times not to exaggerate’. We speak such phrases without irony, and hear them similarly – we are used to hearing and speaking such things. We know metaphors, similes, and other grammatical devices add to the flavour of speech and story. Not only do we like such devices, we demand them. No one wants to hear the truth on its own, we need to be lured into a story. Creative expression is one way to make that happen, but what about biography, memoir, history? What levels of truth do we require when reading about our collective past? Are we willing to make the same sacrifices when we read history, as when we listen to a friend recall an anecdote about a ski weekend or a summer holiday road trip? It would seem that we are – as both readers and writers.

A memoir ‘has to have a narrative and development and denouement. And sometimes that means the story might sacrifice small accuracies for larger truth’...even though a memoir represents something real – a person’s life – it is nevertheless an artistic representation, and as such, its ‘truth’ is not as easily defined as [some] critics would like to believe...How can one best express the true nature of his or her self? What exactly is a ‘self’? in a memoir, what does it mean to be ‘true? the ambiguity of the answers to such questions in no small part contributes to the

¹⁶ “Plato – who may have understood better what forms the mind of man than do some of our contemporaries who want their children exposed only to ‘real’ people and everyday events – knew what intellectual experiences make for true humanity. He suggested that the future citizens of his ideal republic begin their literary education with the telling of myth, rather than mere facts or so-called rational teachings. Even Aristotle, master of pure reason, said: ‘The friend of wisdom is also a friend of myth’.” (Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, p. 35).

memoir's enduring popularity among writers and readers." (Versaci, 2007, pp. 35-36).

Enduring popularity is what creates narrative and history itself. As discussed, there is indeed potential for flaw and fallacy within our memories, and thus our memory work, and in the end with our narratives, and our personal and collective histories. It is perhaps a design flaw within humanity – of the human mind. While time moves forward, so do our memories. Once again our recollections of a distant past are shaped by our immediate present. A memory can be shaped and reshaped every few years, months, or even days. Time moves forward, and takes with it our memories, but not always at the same rate.

We are indulging in the architectonics of memory (remembering) without a very deep knowledge of the way memory works as a dramatic representation of the images in the unconscious. We seem to be telling stories about memory without always or clearly understanding that memory is not a trustworthy representation of chronology in history. Memory is asynchronous. (Zaslove and Lowry, 2006, p. 250).

The fine line of truth within history, narrative and story is easily smudged – at times unwittingly and unknowingly. Of course it is once again about the story, the narrative. A good story will be enjoyed, it will engage an audience, it will be remembered. It will become *true*: but because memory is not trustworthy, at times the story is again embellished, or shaped to suit the needs (or memories) of the storyteller. The facts and the truth at times diverge from one another *because* memory is not asynchronous.

Let me amend Tim O'Brien's wise observation: 'You have to tell the truth in literature, even if you have to lie.' All great authors lie. They have to, regardless of the genre they've selected. There is no such thing as absolute truth in writing whether it serves fiction, non-

fiction, theatre, history, geography, or the Bible...I once had the privilege of studying with Marshall McLuhan and, after the class had discussed one of his most celebrated observations about the effects of media on perception...one of the students asked McLuhan what facts he'd used to arrive at this truth. McLuhan said, 'Anyone can tell the truth with the facts. It's when you don't have the facts and tell the truth that you're special'. (Kertes, 2006, p. 38).

Holocaust Memory and Narrative

One cannot enter into a discussion about Holocaust memory, memoirs and literature without acknowledging the longstanding debates surrounding Holocaust representation (and even about what Holocaust narratives really are).¹⁷ Many scholars, writers, and laypersons have discussed the merit of Holocaust narratives, and numerous other art forms used to express Holocaust experience and memory. Some feel that any expression is valid if it comes from a place of integrity, others argue that any representation is itself a form far removed from the realm of experience – but how then do we document, discuss, or remember anything at all? Both sides of this debate raise compelling points for concern and question.

The question of representation of the Holocaust haunts Holocaust writers and scholars alike, and generates a series of other questions, both theoretical and practical. How can such an event be adequately and faithfully represented? Perhaps more importantly, how can it be commemorated? Can the Holocaust text commemorate in a satisfactory way both the events and the victims? (Harrowitz, 1990, p. 26).

¹⁷ "The term myth of the 'Holocaust' – for all its problematic connotations – is useful for distinguishing between the historical event – the Holocaust – and the representation of that event – the myth of the 'Holocaust'. It is a distinction noted by the writer Lawrence Langer who points out 'the two planes on which the event we call the Holocaust takes place in human memory – the historical and the rhetorical, the way it was and its verbal reformation, or deformation, by later commentators'...The myth of the 'Holocaust' may have drawn on the historical Holocaust, but it now exists apart from the historical event." (Cole, 1999, p. 4).

Without detracting from the Holocaust in any way whatsoever, issues of representation are of great importance when discussing *any* event – however there is obviously so much more at stake when one discusses events surrounding the Holocaust. The sheer scale of the decimation focussed upon, and carried out against one targeted group of people is without compare. Genocide and ethnic cleansing are unfortunately very old ideas, if not by name certainly in action. But the systematic destruction of six million Jews in war torn Europe during the Second World War is still nearly unfathomable. This is why issues of representation are always close at hand and heart, when exploring Holocaust narratives and literature, and other art forms. Collectively, we need to get it right when we're discussing the preservation of this era of history.¹⁸

As there are some that view all (literary) representations as *violations of the facts*, there too are others that seek to understand the numerous entry points that exist in which to engage and discuss the Holocaust and the events of the Second World War.

We may never know what the Holocaust *was* for those who endured it, but we do know what has been said about it and...the varied ways writers have chosen to say it. If the Holocaust has ceased to seem an event and become instead a theme for prose narrative, fiction, or verse, this is not to diminish the importance, but to alter the route by which we approach it. (Langer, 1995, p. 3).

¹⁸ “Berel Lang argues in his essay *The Representations of Limits* that all literary representations of the Holocaust are violations of the facts of history, and that the violation of the facts of history is immoral in the same way that the violation of persons is. Literary representations violate the facts of history because the mere idea of such ‘imaginative representations’ makes the implicit claim ‘that the facts do not speak for themselves, that figurative condensation and displacement and the authorial presence these articulate will turn or supplement the historical subject (whatever it is) in a way that represents the subject more compellingly or effectively – in the end, more truly – than would be the case without them’.” (Hungerford, 1999, p. 102).

Again I acknowledge that issues of representation are complex and at times somewhat incomprehensible, still the works of Levi and Spiegelman tackle these very issues and their works exist and stand on their own. While there is no way to relive the experiences of Levi first hand, he nevertheless brings us into his world – of survival in Auschwitz. Spiegelman is removed from the experience of his father by time and space, separated by a generation, thus his very work is an example of how to bring experience – history, narrative, story – into the present and preserve it for the future. Both writers presented compelling narratives that have become part of the fabric of our culture. In highlighting and discussing these two very different forms of narrative (and representation), a history of storytelling and narrative is revealed through the works.

The storyteller joins the ranks of the teachers and sages. He has counsel – not for a few situations, as the proverb does, but for the many, like the sage. For it is granted to him to reach back to a whole lifetime (a life, incidentally, that comprises not only his own experience but no little of the experience of others; what the storyteller knows from hearsay is added to his own). His gift is the ability to relate his life; his distinction, to be able to tell his entire life. The storyteller: he is the man who could let the wick of this life be consumed completely by the gentle flame of this story. This is the basis of the incomparable aura of the storyteller...The storyteller is the figure in which the righteous man encounters himself. (Benjamin, 1968, pp. 108-109).

The storyteller must learn to tell their story to a *new* audience, in *new* ways. The works discussed by Levi and Spiegelman¹⁹ have transcended the genre of Holocaust literature and narrative, and have permeated cultural consciousness on an even greater scale. My goal is not to detract from the importance of discussions related to issues of Holocaust representation²⁰, nor to discredit those debates whatsoever, but rather to leave that dialogue to others. My aim within this personal project is to examine two key works and to discuss how they entered, and have remained within our culture, and how they have affected my story. My objective as outlined in the previous chapter is also about how narrative is constructed and created – and how by extension memory is directly linked to stories – in this case through the works of Levi and Spiegelman.

Primo Levi wrote about his internment in Auschwitz with a power and clarity not seen before him – and perhaps not since? Levi was the first to admit

¹⁹ “Any truly creative and responsible treatment of the Holocaust cannot ignore the demanding moral aspects of the subject, which call for a consideration of the enormity of the event and the limits of its representation, together with the imperative to remember, the necessary caution involved in what to remember, and the humility required when approaching how to remember. Spiegelman’s [and Levi’s] work embodies these qualities, and he uses the conventions of the comic book both sensitively and self-consciously in order to preserve historical memory.” (Versaci, 2007, p. 101). While Levi dealt only with prose the comment completely exemplifies his work too, in some ways on a greater scale as Levi was one of the first to document Holocaust narrative/memoir, he was ‘creating’ a genre and had no other works for comparison.

²⁰ Different forms of media speak to different audiences. David Bathrick, professor of German Studies at Cornell University, states the following about the German miniseries, *Holocaust*, which first aired in January of 1979. “In the German discussion of *Holocaust*, we are of course also dealing with the questions of memory and representation, but here the issue is much more one of a perceived crisis of aesthetic failure called forth by the emotional response of the German public to this television miniseries. The key question that had to be faced in the light of *Holocaust*’s success in Germany was precisely why this series opened up an understanding of the Holocaust that all the enlightened, rational, objective discourses and aesthetic representations of prior decades had failed to produce.” (Bathrick, 2005, p. 143). In the same manner, the works of Levi and Spiegelman, though not at first, have reached and spoken to audiences that did not exist before they were written. There is no ‘universal understanding’ of the Holocaust or any event for that matter, however there are human experiences – history, narratives, stories – that can be shared in ways that speak to, and reach audiences. Levi and Spiegelman have accomplished this with their work.

that the story is in the telling, in the writing. His highly praised and literary Holocaust narrative has come to be held up as a key example of the tremendous power of narrative. His staid and sober prose tells a complex tale in its simplest form. His objective, almost scientific tone, set the stage for an enduring and timeless piece of literature. It is a story of great strength. It is a story of complexity and contradiction. It is a story of truth and survival.

CHAPTER 3: PRIMO LEVI

Life After Death

On the surfaces of others, on the skin of their faces, we see being formed and expressed indications and knowledge, we see their convictions, their will, their determination, but we also sense sensibility, sensitivity, and susceptibility. We sense the tremblings of pleasure that die away and the anxieties of pain that compress someone in their own skins...We sense the lassitude and debility into which what she declares or proposes sinks. We see the flares of insight and determination in his eyes and we also see them engulfed in the hopeless darkness of those eyes. – Alphonso Lingis

My great uncle Bill Matthews went to war in 1937. He joined the MacKenzie-Papineau Battalion and went to fight in the Spanish Civil War against the Nazi supported Spanish fascists. While he did not fight the Nazis directly, the Second World War, for Bill, was about stopping the march of Hitler, Mussolini and Franco. There was a sense that what was going on 'over there' was 'just wrong'. Living a life of freedom in Canada was not yet taken for granted. The earlier struggles of our family, similar to thousands of others who immigrated to Canada, were not yet far-away memories. The freedom that Canada offered – religious, political, and more – was taken very seriously, and it was important to protect the rights and freedom of others, even 'over there' in Europe. Uncle Bill's father Steve (my great-grandfather's brother) did not urge his son to enlist with the Canadian Armed Forces, nor did he try to dissuade his idealistic young son. It's a funny thing, my family have always been pacifists in my lifetime, and perhaps it is because of the two World Wars. The threat of war has never been

very prominent for most Canadians, not since the Second World War, and we haven't felt the peril of war in our country for generations. It's easy to be a pacifist in Canada. No one would ever disagree – pacifist or other – that those who fought bravely to stop the Nazi march across Europe, are all heroes. Personally I am extremely grateful and have the utmost respect for those who gave their lives during the two world wars – or any war – and whether they died at war, or were fortunate and made it home to loved ones, their sacrifices were and are eternal. I'm not sure that I would have gone to war in 1937, as Uncle Bill did, as I said, it's easy to be a pacifist in Canada. Today, I have one cousin, a few years younger than I am who is a member of the Canadian Navy, but he has been the first to join the armed forces since Uncle Bill.

Uncle Bill enlisted, underage, as did many Canadian soldiers, with the hope of upholding democracy by helping to stop the crushing march of fascism in Europe. Like many rural farm boys, Bill was also keen to get out and see the world. The war effort made sense to many young men at the time – fulfil a role of patriotism and duty, and get a chance to see the world. It's ironic that younger generations seem not to listen too closely to their fathers and families who have returned from war, and often still feel that somehow going off to war, is going off in search of adventure. In some ways, perhaps it is an adventure of sorts, though with the deadliest of consequences at stake. There is not much to romanticize when at one moment your best friend is at your side, then frozen with terror, and minutes later later dying in your arms. He knows he's dying, and you know it too, and there is nothing that you say or do to erase or ease the pain or the terror.

Fifteen hundred young Canadians went to Spain, and less than half returned. Bill was fortunate, he came back – but his best friend did not – nor did many others he was close to. But if Uncle Bill and countless Canadians had not fought in Spain, and the thousands of Canadians, Americans, and European troops had not made a vigilant effort to oppose the rise of Nazism in Europe, the histories of the world would have been written very differently.

The ‘Mac-Paps’ as they were known, were not welcomed home as heroes²¹, because Canada had passed the Foreign Enlistment Act in April of 1937. This meant that the Mac-Paps were illegally participating in the Spanish Civil War. But most of them were already there, and fully entrenched in the war effort, so they stayed on and fought. There were recruits who continued to join their battalion, and left Canada for Spain knowing that they were to become illegal operatives in the war in Spain. But they were going to join brothers, friends, soldiers – they went because they felt they had to.

The First and Second World Wars have left their indelible mark upon us all. There is no way to understand the history of the Western world without examining the impact of those two wars and their collective aftermath. There is almost no one in the west (and many in the east) who does not have some connection to either, or both, of the great world wars. Everyone has a story, and the story is made real in its telling. My great Uncle Bill told his story, to his son, his grandson, to his nephews, and in doing so the story eventually came to me. We often know the facts – but we don’t always know the stories. After the horror

²¹ It literally took decades before any recognition was given to the service of the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion. A small monument was erected in Ottawa in 2001.

of the Holocaust, Primo Levi was one of the first to tell his story – to bear witness
– to tell his story about the living hells inside the concentration camps

A Tale to Tell

If This Is A Man

You who live safe
In your warm houses,
You who find, returning in the evening,
Hot food and friendly faces:
Consider if this is a man
Who works in the mud
Who does not know peace
Who fights for a scrap of bread
Who dies because of a yes or a no.
Consider if this is a woman,
Without hair and without name
With no more strength to remember,
Her eyes empty and her womb cold
Like a frog in winter.
Meditate that this came about:
I commend these words to you.
Carve them in your hearts
At home, in the street,
Going to bed, rising:
Repeat them to your children,
Or may your house fall apart,
May illness impede you,
May your children turn their faces from you.

These words from Primo Levi are the first we read as he begins his story
of the horror of surviving Auschwitz. He stated:

When I wrote the book, almost forty years ago now, I had one precise idea in mind, and it was certainly not to write a work of literature. It was rather to bear witness, and a witness is all the more credible the less he exaggerates or the less he risks being taken for someone who is exaggerating. As I say at the end of the Preface, I was afraid that the events related might be taken as inventions, although unfortunately they were all true.” (Vigevani, 2001, p. 250).

I first read Primo Levi's *If This Is a Man* in the fall of 1999. I had been working at the VHEC for several months and decided it was time to read my first survivor memoir. I found it to be a book of great difficulty, in that while I was compelled to read further each day, I was also hesitant to do so. Some days I could only digest a few pages at a time. It was an exposure to the Holocaust that I had not yet received. Levi's narrative reached a place within me that had not been touched by other material. But it was indeed a book that presented much reward, and a text to which I have returned to many times over the years.

Levi was interned at Auschwitz for less than one year. He was captured by the Italian Fascist Militia in mid-December of 1943 and by the end of January, 1944 had arrived at one of the most horrific death camps the world has ever known. (Levi, 1991, p. 19). By his own account, Levi did not suffer as badly at the hands of the Nazis as many other inmates. And he obviously did not suffer as much as those who did not survive the war, the months of internment, the liquidations, the transports, the death marches, or the gas chambers. Levi saw countless eyes *engulfed in the hopeless darkness*. Yet he somehow survived Auschwitz and the madness and chaos of the Second World War – what then is his legacy, his lesson from history? Tim O'Brien states about his platoon during their tour of duty in Vietnam: "They shared the weight of memory. They took up what others could no longer bear...They carried their own lives." (O'Brien, 1998, pp. 14-15). Levi, many years before O'Brien and his band of brothers, took it upon himself to carry the weight of his memory, his life, and that decision carried him into an uncertain future.

Levi's personal account of his time in Auschwitz was documented in his first book, *If This is a Man*, written just after the end of the Second World War. Levi wrote about his experience in 1947, two short years after the war. At the time his work went virtually unnoticed. Levi's account of his internment at Auschwitz, published first in Italian, sold approximately 2500 copies (Levi, 2005, p. 161). Translated into English, and republished in 1958 as *Survival in Auschwitz* – renamed in an attempt to capture a broader, mainstream audience – the book has since never been out of print, and Levi has come to be regarded as one of the 20th century's most important and influential writers.

As noted Levi's first book was not a best-seller when it was released, it was not even a good seller. What has changed between the present day and the time that Levi set out to tell his story in 1947? Certainly it takes time to review and absorb the details of an event. An event that took place on the scale of the Second World War, across multiple countries and continents, having an impact upon the lives of millions of people worldwide, would not have been easily understood just two short years after VE Day in 1945. It is said that hindsight is 20/20 – so too it would seem is the hindsight of history.

For Levi and scores of Holocaust survivors, literature has provided a means of documenting experience and of disseminating the details of their experiences, though, as noted, the art of writing has not always held such prominence in our societies. And while not everyone upholds narratives about the Holocaust as great literature or as works of art – and not all are – there is undeniably something about Levi's first book that has captured, and retained, an

audience since the late 1950s. All of this from a chemist? “I came to be a writer without choosing it. I am a chemist. I came to be a writer because I was captured as a partisan and ended up in the concentration camp as a Jew.” (Levi, 2005, p. 101). It turns out Levi was much more than the sum of his parts – chemist, partisan, prisoner, survivor, writer. Levi continues:

I hoped to live ‘in order to’ tell of what we had seen. This was not just my desire, but everybody’s, and it was reflected in the form of a dream, which for many of us was exactly the same; recently I chanced to read the same thing in a book by a deported Frenchwoman...the dream was of telling our story, usually to someone dear to us. But we never managed to finish. Our interlocutor was indifferent, was not listening, and after a while would turn his back, walk away and disappear. (Levi, 2005, p. 101).

Levi’s treatise about his incarceration has come to be widely regarded as one of the great books within the canon of Western literature. Having said that, much of what separates *If This Is A Man* from other narratives – Holocaust or other – is its break from the conventional forms and structure of history, narrative, and story. Perhaps it is the nature of the experience and the very subject matter that initially set the stage for very different form of narrative to emerge. But Levi’s writing and his writing style cannot be underestimated in terms of its clarity and depth of prose. His ability to clearly state – and to never overstate or exaggerate – elevated his text to a new level in storytelling. In his timely and somber telling of his incarceration, his work has transcended what many would typically expect from a Holocaust memoir or survivor testimony. Levi, perhaps more than any other Holocaust writer, has gone on to influence and inspire others to work within the Holocaust as a subject of artistic expression. His work did not exist within a vacuum and has functioned as an evolving, enduring and inspiring work of art.

For [many] artists Primo Levi and Anne Frank represent the most potent personalities of the Holocaust...Unlike Frank, whose figure and message has been iconographic, Levi's messages continued to evolve until his death in 1987. In an interesting way, many artists have acknowledged that Levi, more than any other survivor, has been of significant influence for their understanding of the Holocaust [and thus for the rest of us too], an event that they did not experience but seek, nonetheless, to comprehend. The result has been that much of Levi's writing has been used as a springboard for a creative investigation of the Holocaust. (Feinstein, 2001, p. 133).

It is a written work that has sparked discussion and debate about the very meaning of what it is to be human. Levi's account has been at the centre of much discussion, and has sought to answer, or at least question, the core questions that challenge us on a metaphysical level. And in its honesty, its brutal honesty, the face of humanity is not always what we want or expect to see – we see that we are perhaps, 'human all too human'. Levi explores the duality of human nature – good and evil – the human nature of the captors *and* the inmates. In a chapter of *If This Is A Man* entitled 'This Side of Good and Evil', Levi describes the details the camp 'Market'. It is essentially a black market of stolen goods taken from other inmates, dead prisoners, from anyone else who has something worth taking, that were traded, bartered, and perhaps stolen again. The description by Levi is not one of mutual assistance and empathy, but one of *survival*. I "invite the reader to contemplate the possible meaning in the Lager of the words 'good' and 'evil, 'just' and 'unjust'; let everybody judge, on the basis of the picture we have outlined...how much of our ordinary moral world could survive on this side of the barbed wire." (Levi, 1991, p. 92). What lengths would any one of us go to in order to survive just one day in Auschwitz?

Questions of morality under extreme circumstances have been explored by many others, before Levi, and since. Much of the work by early modernist philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche²² sought to uncover the nature of humanity – long before the bloodshed and terror of either of the Great Wars. Nietzsche’s work has long challenged readers and scholars, and the density of his prose has at times made it easy to misunderstand, to co-opt and (re)interpret his work in many ways. It’s important to note the work of Nietzsche with regard to the Second World War, as much of his posthumous works were linked to Nazi ideology in a very insubstantial and tenuous manner. It is interesting and ironic to note that Nietzsche’s ideas were subverted during the Second World War (and since) and were used to undermine the very work he had earlier been engaged within.²³ The German nationalism proposed and implemented by the Nazi party was definitely not something that Nietzsche would have supported. Nietzsche’s work on the duality of human nature and the search to overcome ourselves is a topic of discussion all unto its own – what is important to note is that the crux of his work was an eerie foreshadowing of a terrible time to come, and his work still

²² “Nietzsche points out that man could not become conscious of the beautiful and the good without becoming conscious of the ugly and the evil. To become powerful, to gain freedom, to master his impulses and perfect himself, man must first develop the feeling that his impulses are evil. This recognition is the essence of the bad conscience; man says to himself: my inclinations are damnable, and I am evil. At this point, man is divided against himself. There are two selves, as it were, one rational and the other irrational. The one self then tries to give form to the other; man tries to remake himself, to give ‘style’ to himself, and to organize the chaos of his passions. His impulses are recalcitrant; man suffers and feels guilty; and he does violence to himself and ravishes his animal nature.” (Kaufmann, 1974, p. 253).

²³ *The Will to Power*, often associated with Nazi ideology, was assembled by Nietzsche’s sister – Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, based on notes and unfinished manuscripts. Elisabeth was married to Bernard Förster, who was the leader of an antisemitic movement in Germany, and a founder of a Teutonic colony in Paraguay. It was Elisabeth who helped shape and create the Nietzsche myth that was adopted by the Nazis. (Kaufmann, pp. 4-5). Nietzsche himself often spoke harshly about ideas of nationalism – German or other – and highly about Poles, Jews and other Europeans, while putting forward social and cultural ideals that were collaborative, not exclusionary. (Kaufmann, 1974, p 284 and p. 289).

today, has likely not fully been understood or grappled with by very many scholars.

Levi and other post-war thinkers like psychiatrist Victor Frankl, also a survivor of the concentration camps, sought to uncover the meaning and the duality (the good and evil) of their experiences. Frankl states:

Life in a concentration camp tore open the human soul and exposed its depths. It is surprising that in those depths we again found only human qualities which in their very nature were a mixture of good and evil? The rift dividing good from evil, which goes through all human beings, reaches into the lowest and becomes apparent even at the bottom of the abyss which is laid open by the concentration camp. (Frankl, 1985, p. 108).

What was initially remarkable, and has since come to separate and define Levi's narrative from so many others who wrote about their experiences during the Holocaust and the Second World War, is the stark simplicity and the objective tone that is immediately set within the first pages of his memoir. Levi is able to view two sides of life, the intricacies, the fragility – the *paradox* and *contradiction*.

Sooner or later in life everyone discovers that perfect happiness is unrealizable, but there are few who pause to consider the antithesis: that perfect unhappiness is equally unattainable. The obstacles preventing the realization of both these states are the same nature: they derive from our human condition which is opposed to everything infinite. (Levi, 1991, p. 23).

It is “the non-exaggeration of Levi's writing that [makes] it real.” (Feinstein, 2001, p. 152). Levi came to bear witness – to observe good and evil – and states that clearly early on in his memoir, “even in this place one can survive, and therefore one must want to survive, to tell the story, to bear witness, and that to survive we must force ourselves to save at least the skeleton, the scaffolding, the

form of civilization.” (Levi, 1991, p. 47). Levi saw hundreds of inmates fall away during internment, but he also saw those who stood in defiance – those who survived. Bearing witness, itself, was a reason to survive. Levi stated: “Already in Auschwitz I knew that if I survived, I would have to tell what I had seen, that I would not be able to avoid it. And not only that; I knew that this telling, this bearing witness, was a purpose that made it worth staying alive.” (Signorini, 2001, p. 174).

There is an essence in his work that transcends the deadly routines, and the horror of his time in Auschwitz. Can one *truly* understand the brutality of the extermination camp? It seems impossible without having been there. “Those who have survived the camps possess a vocabulary that the rest of us can only approximate and never truly understand...Levi introduces a tension between the first and subsequent generations – the seemingly insurmountable gap of experience.” (Versaci, 2007, p. 86).²⁴ Still, Levi takes the reader as close as is possible to the edge of his experiences – and he does it without exaggeration or exploitation. He simply, and profoundly, states the facts – sometimes the truth *is* enough. From author and journalist Paul Bailey, in his introduction to *If This Is A Man*, he states:

What is chastening about Levi’s writing is its freedom from self-indulgence. There isn’t even a hint of hysterical recrimination. How easy, and how understandable it would have been for him to have

²⁴ In the preface to his Holocaust memoir, *Night*, Elie Wiesel, Nobel laureate and survivor of Auschwitz reinforces the statement about experience. While the stories about internment and survival have been told, it is not unrealistic to state that those of us who were not there, will never really *know*: “Deep down, the witness knew then, as he does now, that his testimony would not be received [or fully understood]. After all, it deals with an event that sprang from the darkest zone of man. Only those who experienced Auschwitz know what it was. Others will never know.” (Wiesel, p. ix).

adopted such a tone. He chose to build instead: out of the mud, the blows dealt without anger, out of that unique humiliation he has constructed two²⁵ incomparable works of art, written in a careful, weighted and serenely beautiful prose. (Levi, 1991, p. 11).

In his own words, Levi echoes the sentiment:

It's true that I refrained from formulating judgments in *Survival in Auschwitz [If This is a Man]*. I did so deliberately, because it seemed to me inopportune, not to say importunate, on my part of the witness, namely myself, to take the place of the judge. So I suspended any explicit judgment, while the implicit judgments are clearly there. (Shepley, 1987, p. 13).

Again O'Brien, many years later, in his pensive, emotionally charged, and touchingly human account of his experience in Vietnam, *The Things They Carried*, says that: "A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behaviour, nor restrain men from doing the things that men have always done... There is no rectitude. There is no virtue." (O'Brien, 1998, pp. 68-69). The implicit judgements are clearly there, but they are not there to suggest 'right' or 'wrong' – at times right and wrong are clearly identified, at others, they are buried deeply within the filth and the muck of war.

Levi, like O'Brien, does not moralize or lead readers down a particular path. This 'lack of moralizing' is necessary to illuminate and to share experience – universal themes of humanity – *and* individual experience. The places in the story, or in the artwork, that sometimes feel like 'gaps' – where something might be missing – is where the author or artist has given us place for pause; a place

²⁵ *The Truce*, Levi's book about his journey home after liberation, is the second part of his Holocaust story, both books are two halves of the same memoir.

where the reader or viewer might insert themselves into the narrative or picture. If we can't see ourselves in the mirror, then we can't begin to grasp the story that is being told – whether it be in the form of literature, visual arts, or other forms of creative expression.

Those who survived the war and the terror of Nazi Germany did so in many ways. There are numerous and complex scenarios that saw men, women, children, and entire families find their way to freedom – though six million did not. And that is not to say that everyone who had strength and courage was able to defeat the tyranny of the Nazis – many died trying. There are countless stories that also tell of the courage and kindness of civilians and even soldiers – those who helped one, two, or more people escape cruelty, punishment, or death. Luck too played a great role:

As for survival...I insist there was no general rule, except entering the camp in good health and knowing German. Barring this, luck dominated. I have seen the survival of shrewd people and silly people, the brave and the cowardly, 'thinkers' and madmen. In my case luck played an essential role on at least two occasions. (Levi, 1996, p. 180).

Luck and fate are two sides of the same coin – strength, courage, honour – they will not always set you free. Though Levi suggests that an element of humanity that emphasized dignity and defiance was also part of survival.

We are slaves, deprived of every right, exposed to every insult, condemned to certain death, but we still possess one power, and we must defend it with all our strength for it is the last – the power to refuse our consent. So we must certainly wash our faces, without soap in dirty water and dry ourselves on our jackets. We must polish our shoes, not because regulation states it, but for dignity and propriety. We must walk erect, without dragging our feet, not in

homage to Prussian discipline but to remain alive, not to begin to die. (Levi, 1991, p. 47).

The duality of Levi's story should be noted – paradox and contradiction – though resistance is key to his narrative, dignity and self-respect were not always present. Levi describes a recurring dream he had during his internment, in which only pain is present.

A desolating grief is now born in me, like certain barely remembered pains of one's early infancy. It is a pain in its pure state, not tempered by a sense of reality and by the intrusion of extraneous circumstances, a pain like that which makes children cry...My dream stands in front of me, still warm, and although awake I am still full of its anguish: and then I remember that it is not a haphazard dream, but that I have dreamed it not once but many times since I arrived here. (Levi, 1991, p. 66).

One day might see hope, perhaps defiance, the next day could be filled with hopelessness and despair and death. It would have been nearly impossible to maintain any sense of self-worth or dignity when suffering the fate of the concentration camps. Jews and other groups targeted for persecution and extermination by the Nazis were treated worse than beasts. They had become so dehumanized through the relentless actions and propaganda of the Nazis, that it would have been far easier to succumb to the horrific abuse and maltreatment than to survive it – many suffered the former and did not live to tell their stories. Levi was fortunate in his victory over the hands of his persecutors. It is understatement to say it could not have been easy, for anyone who survived. How does one comprehend life after staring death in the face for so long? The act of writing and reliving the experience in the years directly after the Holocaust leading up to the first publication of *If This Is A Man* in 1947, would have been an

astonishing feat – both of courage and determination. But it too must have seemed an insurmountable task. How does one reconcile the flood of emotions so soon after the event? How difficult would the task of telling the story really have been soon after the war ended? Ricoeur suggests: “A further reason for the difficulty in communicating has to do with the fact that the witness himself has no distance on the events; he was a ‘participant’, without being the agent, the actor; he was the victim. How [does one] ‘relate [to] one’s own death?’” asks Primo Levi. (Ricoeur, 2004, p. 176).

A Time to Tell

Levi’s *If This Is A Man* is indeed a modern classic. In the way that memoirs from the First World War have permeated popular culture, such as *All is Quiet on the Western Front*, Levi’s work has become synonymous with the Second World War, with the Holocaust. Approximately three generations since the horror of the Second World War, it illustrates so well the disorder of modern life, then and now, as well as the violence and terror that are also innate within human nature and behaviour. Within our world, our societies, within our selves, lies the duality of human nature. For better or for worse it seems that often tales of war and terror are well suited to illustrating the madness of modernity. The history of the world is a history of war and conflict on one side of the coin, obedience and complicity on the other.

To call Levi’s book a masterpiece or a great work of art nearly demeans it in some way – or at least robs some of its purity of spirit – some of Levi’s spirit. Somehow the essence of ‘greatness’ becomes ever so slightly tarnished through

art and literature when dealing with subjects of tragedy on this scale – how does one create a ‘masterpiece’ when dealing with the Holocaust or any other terrible tragedy? This returns us to questions about representation and how to maintain the purity of experience and expression within the form of narrative (or other forms of Holocaust expression). Perhaps it is because we too can see ourselves in the story – and perhaps we are not sure what side of good and evil we may have stood in 1940s Europe during the rise of Nazism. It’s easy to sit in one’s favourite comfortable chair reading Primo Levi, and think to ourselves about how terrible it must have been to be interned in Auschwitz – but what would we have done to scratch and claw toward even the slimmest glimmer of hope and survival? It’s impossible to say, we weren’t there, and this too is what Levi is saying. Even as a survivor of the death camps, Levi himself had some reservation about his role as ‘witness’. If Levi had this concern within his own story, it seems impossible for Levi’s readers to fully grasp and make sense of the camp. Levi suggests the real witnesses took their stories with them when they died.

We, the survivors, are not the true witnesses. This is an uncomfortable notion of which I have become conscious little by little, reading the memoirs of others and reading mine at a distance of years. We survivors are not only an exiguous but also an anomalous minority: we are those who by their prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch bottom. Those who did so, those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute, but they are the submerged, the complete witnesses...They are the rule, we are the exception. (Levi, 1989, pp. 83-84).

Levi’s narrative, like life, is again filled with paradox and contradiction. It characterizes the beauty within humanity, simultaneously with the fear and horror

that was observed in Auschwitz – the flipside of *humanity*, which is evil. In bearing witness, Levi's account destroyed something of the human spirit – in all of us – and in some ways this cannot be fully comprehended by readers today. "The memory of war, like all memory, is mostly local." (Sontag, 2003, p. 35). In telling his story, in bearing witness, Levi's account admits the horror of the human psyche and reveals what we are capable of as human beings. In bearing witness, Levi draws a line and makes real the actions of the Nazis, the SS, the camp *kommandants*, the citizens of Germany, of Europe, of the world. Levi tells us of the *drowned*, the living dead in the camps:

One hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death, in the face of which they have no fear, as they are too tired to understand.

They crowd my memory with their faceless presences, and if I could enclose all the evil of our time in one image, I would choose this image which is familiar to me: an emaciated man, with head dropped and shoulders curved, on whose face and in whose eyes not a trace of a thought is to be seen.

If the drowned have no story, and single and broad is the path to perdition, the paths to salvation are many, difficult and improbable. (Levi, 1991, p. 96).

Levi's relationship to salvation, to others in the camp, exemplifies his manner of survival, and the duality of his nature, of human nature. He claimed he was lucky, he had a certain set of skills that served him well, he was at the right place many a time. While he did not make friends as such, and he lost hope – how could he not? – Levi reveals his duality at the end of a chapter entitled *Kraus*. In short Levi tells a fellow inmate, a man called Kraus, about a dream he has had, where Kraus has come to visit after the war. Kraus brings bread to dinner, they eat with family, they share a drink, and Kraus is shown to a warm,

dry bed at the end of the evening. Levi has relayed this story to bolster the mood of another inmate, one who is fumbling and making mistakes. Levi is showing another inmate human kindness – if only for a *brief moment*. But in it all, Levi reveals the darkness that threatens to engulf them all:

Poor silly Kraus. If he only knew that it [the story] is not true, that I have really dreamt nothing about him, that he is nothing to me except for a brief moment, nothing like everything is nothing down here, except the hunger inside and the cold and the rain. (Levi, 1991, p. 141).

By telling, writing, making it real – Levi stamps humanity with an indelible mark – history will never forget this stain – and by doing so it is important to recognize that Levi is making an accusation too – against the Nazis, against the camps, and against the evil that was perpetrated by the Germans, the inmates, and the rest of the world: all who are guilty are accused. Some didn't know, some lived in fear and ignorance, and others refused to believe. In 1947 there were many that believed it never even happened at all.²⁶ The tone is objective, but the evil deeds speak for themselves, and they speak very loudly.

So how does one create context and content, order out of the chaos, and put it into words that can be understood? How does a writer like Levi create a narrative that will be believed, never mind understood? There are many examples of survivors who were disbelieved when they recounted the terror and

²⁶ “Levi’s writing is effective precisely because it is so sensitive to the enormous difficulties inherent in constructing a coherent narrative about life in the camps. Levi reports that in a dream he and many fellow prisoners had with some frequency...the dreamers ‘had returned home and with passion and relief were describing their past suffering, addressing themselves to a loved one, and were not believed, indeed were not even listened to’. This dream is but one manifestation of Levi’s ‘keen awareness of the enormity and therefore the noncredibility of what took place in the Lagers’...Levi writes, the task of the witness is ‘preparing the ground for the judge’.” (Sayre and Vacca, 2001, p. 125).

inhumanity of the camps – it was either too much to fathom and/or too hard to accept in terms of human cruelty, compounded by the lack of action on the part of so many citizens in Europe, and throughout the world.

We are no longer the judges, but Levi has been successful in meeting the goals of his narrative – of preparing the ground – preparing the ground for those who didn't see it, didn't live it, for those who came after.

The Tale is Told

Why did Levi tell his story? He told us he wrote because he had to, he told us that if he survived the horrors of Auschwitz, to bear witness would be part of his life's work. "I wrote because I felt the need to write. If you ask me to go further and find out what produced this need, I can't answer that. I've had the feeling that for me the act of writing was equivalent to lying down on Freud's couch. I felt such an overpowering need to talk about it that I talked out loud." (Shepley, 1987, p. 42). The task of bearing witness was obviously not easy for Levi, nor was it for any survivor. The laborious undertaking of writing a Holocaust memoir – of reliving that hell – is nearly incomprehensible to us who have not lived those (or similar) experiences. In the end, it was a story of survival, the survival of one man, the survival of humanity, and the bonds between us all, young and old.²⁷

Survival in Auschwitz is a complex book: an autobiography, a historical documentation, a narrative which is at times almost

²⁷ Levi stated: "Ever since my first book, *Se questo è un uomo* (*If This Is A Man*), I wanted my works – though they appeared under my name – to be read as collective works...more than that: I wanted them to be an opening, a bridge between us and our readers, especially the young ones...As long as we are alive, it is our task to speak, to others, to those who had not been born then, so that they may know 'the extreme to which one can go'." (Cicioni, 1995, p. 186).

picaresque in its depiction of the daily struggle for food, and ultimately a moral treatise on certain aspects of the human soul studied in the most extreme conditions. The moral backbone of the book is undoubted: every page, every character, every event is presented on the basis of an assumption which is firm and unshakable at the core of the writing: the value of man, the value of human personality, the value of the moral responsibility each of us has towards others – the common bond of humanity. (Biasin, 1990, p. 127).

The creation of such a narrative could not have been easy, and at times would have been overwhelming and nearly impossible for Levi to write, but he obviously had the drive and desire to see his written works come to fruition. Then of course there is again the task of bringing the words to life and creating a compelling narrative. In his mind Levi knew the challenges that were presented by writing about his internment at Auschwitz, but he knew too, that he had promised to bear witness – he had promised himself. Matters of memory were pressing and of great importance, despite the enormity and difficulty of the task. Levi openly acknowledges the difficulty of textual memorials while at the same time insisting on their importance.²⁸

Sometimes, we are left only with words, with works of art, with a story. Though words, art, stories cannot always – or perhaps even often – save us. In her critically acclaimed tome of 2002, *The Double Bond*, Levi biographer Carole Angier ends her work with the following passage:

²⁸ “In *The Periodic Table*, there is a moment in which he constructs a memorial to his friend Sandro, killed by the Fascists: Today I know that it is a hopeless task to try and dress a man in words, make him live again on the printed page, especially a man like Sandro. He was not the sort of person you can tell stories about, nor to whom one erects monuments – he who laughed at all monuments: he lived completely in his deeds, and when they were over nothing of him remains – nothing but words, precisely.” (Harrowitz, 1990, p. 35).

It wasn't the light and air that he had dreamed of, but it was a deep void. One last time the thought knocked at his brain, and found the place waiting there. I think he looked for Lucia [his wife] to stop him. He leaned [over the stairwell railing] and looked, but she wasn't there; and he let go. (Angier, 2002, p. 731).

Personal salvation is not always found in artistic expression or through the exorcism of demons. Primo Levi committed suicide in 1987. While his death remains somewhat controversial, it is generally accepted that he did indeed take his own life. (Kremer, 2001, p. xiii). Much has been written about the circumstances surrounding his death, but perhaps Levi said it best himself: "The living are more demanding; the dead can wait." (Levi, 1987, p. 178). Perhaps the demands that presented themselves to Levi, eventually overcame him? Near the end of his life Levi suffered from depression and was plagued by various physical and psychological ailments. He was neither well, nor happy. There is still much to learn about the effects of depression on the human body – and the mind – more than two decades after Levi's death. And while his writing did not save him, it most certainly did not kill him either. Levi most certainly suffered for his work, more than most, but the survival of Auschwitz gave him something with which to anchor himself. If he survived the concentration camp, he would bear witness, he would live to tell his story: survive and tell he did. Levi did what many of us would not have had the courage to do, in remembering his misery and in bringing it to the world. His work is his legacy, and it stands on its own. Levi is best known as a writer of Holocaust literature, and because he wrote his story the world knows the collective story of internment in Auschwitz. In some way that helped tell all other stories – to open a door through which others writers followed. In surviving

and writing about the camp, Levi defeated his captors and triumphed over their evil deeds. While he carried the weight of his experience and the experience of the others around him, he survived – Auschwitz has not. “Primo Levi’s death was personal. It was a tragedy, but it was not a victory for Auschwitz.” (Angier, 2002, p. 727).

Primo Levi did not die, or for that matter live, in vain. His work, in all genres, is of the highest calibre and has proven itself timeless and enduring. His task was overwhelming and his burden would have been emotionally overpowering at times – like the burden of all survivors – but especially that of the witness. Levi set the stage and opened the door – for writers *and* for readers too – the listeners. There have been numerous Holocaust narratives and survivor testimonies, but someone had to be first – to shed light upon the atrocities that so many saw, and so few survived to tell. Undoubtedly there may have been others who preceded Levi’s foray into narrative, still, *If This Is A Man* has been a catalyst for all who have written Holocaust memoirs since. The strength and determination of his work has influenced not only Levi’s peers and a generation of survivors and witnesses, but also the ‘second generation’ – the children of Holocaust survivors – including artist, illustrator, comic book historian, and graphic novelist Art Spiegelman, the author of *Maus*.

CHAPTER 4: ART SPIEGELMAN

When Do We Know Ourselves?

The bare skin our hand touches and the naked eyes our look makes contact with do not, like the surfaces and contours of wood or clay, from the first reveal the inner grain and substance of a thing. They extend before us a surface of sensitivity and susceptibility. – Alphonso Lingis

In the fall of 2001 my father suffered a serious heart attack – I was 34 years old. My grandfather Walter, died of a heart attack in the summer of 1967 – just weeks before I was born – thus I never knew him. He was out working the fields, alone. Helen, his wife, went looking for him, late in the day, as the sun was setting, and could see the tractor off in the distance – it was stopped – no longer idling and echoing across the big prairie sky and shimmering wheat fields. My grandmother found her husband's body slumped in the dirt: he was pale and lifeless. No one can ever know what went through his mind in his last fleeting moments. The local town doctor suggested that death came quickly, and that my grandfather did not suffer. I wonder to where his dying thoughts led? Did he even know that he was dying? Was his mind drawn to practical thoughts – the cows are still out, who will bring them in? Or perhaps more personal – I didn't tell my wife I loved her this morning. Perhaps he even thought about me, his unborn grandchild, and wondered whether he and I would ever have the chance to meet. We did not.

From a very young age I have always and often thought about death and dying. But as a child, and still as a teen, the long and lengthy days of my life were still all ahead of me. At age 29 I realized how quickly time really does start to pass – hadn't I just turned 20? At 34, I had already suffered the loss of many loved ones (friends, family, young and old) – I watched them pass from this life – perhaps to another? I was no stranger to the delicate balance that we all hold in our hands each day, between life and death. The fragility of this life has *never* escaped me. However, my father's heart attack elevated my awareness and brought a perspective to my life that I had not yet known. I believe that the death of a parent very much cements our individual mortality deep within ourselves. As the generation above passes away, we are literally forced to stare into the void, and come to terms with our own transience here on earth. The scare my family lived through with my father made me realize that our time is indeed limited, and brief at best. We will never have a second chance to do something for the first time.

I realized then, as I do now, that my relationship with my own father, had much to do with the relationship he had with Walter, my grandfather. Since I'd never met my grandfather, I had to rely on the stories that my father and extended family have provided. And the pictures they painted for me, through the stories and anecdotes, have given me building blocks from which to assemble a character in my mind, that of my grandfather Walter. The complexities of human relationships are at times unfathomable. Still, it's what we do, we form and sustain relationships, with our friends, families, co-workers, local shop owners,

and others. The complexity that my father and grandfather shared between them, informs the relationship that all three of us share today – even though Walter has been dead more than 40 years.

I know his heart attack was an impetus for my father to pursue his family history with a renewed and timely interest. Of course time is an issue for us all, in all that we do and want to do. As he and I worked together during the months leading up to the summer of 2003, I learned as much, or more, about my father, my grandfather, and extended family, as I had in my entire life to that point. Sometimes I'm surprised, even shocked, that many things I learned then had never come up before. At times I wonder what it is exactly that we discuss with friends over coffee, with family around the holiday table, with spouses and partners with which we live. At times the mundane threatens to overcome us all.

I had not fully understood the process that I had worked through with my own father until I had read Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, for a second time – shortly after working with my father on the documentation of our family's life in Canada. While *Maus* has reached critical and cultural acclaim on numerous levels, and it has come to be praised as one of the most influential and important Holocaust memoirs, the narrative is not only about Vladek and Anja, but also about Spiegelman and his relationship with his parents. First it is about Spiegelman and his father, Vladek. It is very much about the relationship they had together and about how Spiegelman tries to understand himself, by working through the Holocaust narrative, and the personal history of his father, of Vladek's past. The second relationship, of which Spiegelman struggles to make sense, is that

between himself and his deceased mother. Spiegelman's mother, Anja, committed suicide shortly after he entered into college in 1968. On some level Spiegelman never seems to reconcile or really understand her actions – her death – but perhaps that is something to which we might all relate. Life is complex. We will never fully or completely understand our own lives, or the intricacies of human relationships. And we certainly can't claim to have understanding about death and the afterlife. My father and I still meet at the crossroads from time to time – as did Spiegelman and Vladek – and while we do not always see things in the same way, my father and I continue to make sense of our individual places, within the time and space of our relationship – our history, narrative, story – our lives together and apart.

A Holocaust Comic Book

History, narrative, story. What is it exactly that makes *Maus* what it is, and what it has become? Why and how does it work? What are the elements of *Maus* that has made it so successful, and how and why has it reach and reception been so widespread – what is the *substance of a thing*?

In a recent reissue of a classic Spiegelman collection of comics entitled *Breakdowns* (first published in 1978), Spiegelman continues to unpack and investigate his relationship with his father Vladek. In a newly drawn introduction to the collection, Spiegelman – holding his head in his hands – says “I still wrestle with the memory of my father...And I don't want anyone thinking about me with the roiling emotions I feel towards him.” (Spiegelman, 2008, p. 11). Spiegelman is speaking these words to his own young son Dash, who is firmly

planted in front of his laptop computer, playing a video game. That particular strip ends, with Art literally sitting in Vladek's shadow, alone, saying "Bah! Kids today...they're just not interested in history." (Spiegelman, 2008, p. 11). The narrative and reflection on Spiegelman's past, and his relationship with his father, illustrates the continuing evolution of their time together. It too speaks to the ways in which Art and his son interact based upon the father/son dyad of Vladek and Art. All three, Vladek, Art, and Dash, exist together. *Maus* continues to be relevant and lasting and a great illustration of the narrative/story structure.

Maus has become the most critically praised graphic novel in the history of the form, winning Spiegelman a Pulitzer Prize in 1992. The story of his father's captivity in Nazi concentration camps is a dense miniature of unparalleled emotional power, and has served as the benchmark for subsequent comic art. Spiegelman's criticality regarding the form adroitly intensifies the inherently emotive subject matter: there is a constant back and forth between dense, 'raw' expressionism, delicate touch, and stifling, cramped rigidity of scale and format, resisting sentimentality and roving the degree to which form crucially dictates narrative effect. (Hignite, 2006, p. 42).

Spiegelman was able to fill the pages of *Maus* with the same starkness and objectivity with which Levi wrote *If This Is A Man*. Narrative can take on many forms and functions. In the early 1970s, when Spiegelman was first visualizing and serializing an early version of *Maus*, there were several others who were taking underground comics to a new level. Comic books were morphing into their infancy as graphic novels. The content and form of comics was changing in radical and new ways. While comics had always challenged and satirized political and social mores and norms, the graphic novel was taking on even more. Ultimately the comic book was taking on the guise of the inner-self and becoming autobiographical – even *confessional* at times.

A cartoonist named Justin Green was a very important factor because he really opened up confessional autobiography as a possible area for cartoonists to explore. It just didn't exist as a category before his work. He wrote something called 'Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary', which was about himself, and the guilt and repression and obsessive compulsive disorder that came from growing up Catholic. (Jacobowitz, 2007, p. 156).

This early graphic novel, published in 1972, set the stage for an entirely new approach to the creation of comic books – that of autobiographical *comix*. Spiegelman and others, such as the remarkable Robert Crumb, have touted Green's work as profound and groundbreaking. It was most certainly an influence on Spiegelman and the early incarnations of the *Maus* story. In the foreword to a 1995 reprint of some of Green's seminal work, Spiegelman says outright "without *Binky Brown* there would be no *Maus*. (Green, 1995, p. 4). And decades before Green and Spiegelman inked their stories, the highly influential cartoonist, George Herriman, anthropomorphized a cat, mouse, and dog to explore the human psyche and existence in the highly revered *Krazy Kat* comic strip .

"There is no such thing as a literature of the Holocaust, nor can there be."
(Witek, 1989, p. 97). Elie Wiesel's remarks²⁹ remind me of those of Theodor

²⁹ "Elie Wiesel – who has been particularly outspoken in his criticism of what he sees to be the trivialization of a sacred event – has written of the impossibility of representing the Holocaust. He claims that 'whoever has not lived through the event can never know it. And whoever has lived through the event can never fully reveal it' and famously asserts that in his own writing of this event, he writes to denounce writing. For Wiesel, therefore, there is something unapproachable and unknowable about this past." (Cole, 1999, p. 16).

Adorno³⁰, and there is certainly fodder for debate about what Adorno really meant, and perhaps of Wiesel's words too – since he also wrote what has become one of the best known Holocaust narratives, *Night*, first published in 1958. These types of statements refer back to issues about Holocaust representation, and about the validity of the narratives, and whether the works could ever be considered works of literature or art, or more importantly, valid historical documents. Still, Spiegelman's Holocaust narrative, the story of his father, mother, brother³¹ and himself, has entered an important place in the collective consciousness on many levels – a graphic novel, a Holocaust narrative, an autobiography, and so on. "However, for all its near-universal accolades, *Maus* was not always understood. The stigma of a comic book being frivolous children's literature still made some uncomfortable about the idea of turning such a chapter in Jewish history into one." (Kaplan, 2006, p. 118). This has now changed dramatically, but it's important to understand that *Maus* was not always held in high regard, and there are still those who dismiss it as a

³⁰ Adorno said, "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric." However his critique was not merely about poetry, the Holocaust, and post-war 'art'. The larger quotation speaks to the critique of culture in general and how it had been evolving: "Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today. Absolute reification, which presupposed intellectual progress as one of its elements, is now preparing to absorb the mind entirely. Critical intelligence cannot be equal to this challenge as long as it confines itself to self-satisfied contemplation. (Adorno, 1967, p. 34).

³¹ Spiegelman's parents had a son, before the war, when they were living in Europe – a little boy named Richieu. Another story within the narrative of *Maus* is about Art coming to terms with the death of his brother, whom he had never known, but yet was part of Art's life in ways that he has perhaps still not fully understood. In the end, a brother he has never known, only in photographs, had greatly influenced Spiegelman's life through the lives of his father and mother. There is even a recollection near the end of *Maus II* where Vladek, tired after a long day and interview session refers to Art by his first son's name – even all those years later. "I'm tired from talking, Richieu, and it's enough stories for now...". (Spiegelman, 1991, p. 136).

'comic book'. Early on this sentiment was espoused when Spiegelman was asked to be a part of a conference for children of survivors.

[This was] where children of survivors and children of Nazis were supposed to get together and have a public exchange', he recalls...[the audience was there because of the 'subject', not because of Spiegelman, the graphic artist, and] they were appalled by the very notion of what I had done. It was very hard to talk about it without grumbles from the audience...You know [they were saying], 'Couldn't you wait until we were dead to make fun of us!'. They weren't getting what I had done. (Kaplan, pp. 118-119).

Another group that was incensed by Spiegelman's *Maus* was the Polish-American Public Relations Committee who stated that "the comic book format is suited primarily to presenting stories to audiences of limited literacy in a simplistic form. As such, it cannot be considered an appropriate means for serious teaching of any academic subject." (Versaci, 2007, pp. 82-83). And while it is anecdotal, I have met Holocaust survivors who were not, and are still not comfortable with a 'comic book about the Holocaust'.

While *Maus* is indeed a comic book, a graphic novel, it too is a Holocaust narrative, and much more than the sum of its parts. It is much more complex than it appears on the surface – it is not simply a *comic book* about the Holocaust. *Maus* is also "not about the Holocaust so much as about the survivor's tale itself and the artist-son's recovery of it. In Spiegelman's own words, '*Maus* is not what happened in the past, but rather what the son understands of his father's story'." (Young, 2000, p. 15). It is what we as readers understand about Vladek's story – so intertwined within Spiegelman's – and thus the story of their collective past. Obviously we are not all members of the second generation but we can all

understand the complexity and intricacy of the relationship between parents and children, and of all relationships. And far too many individuals know and understand what affect trauma can have on any relationship. While not everyone knows someone who lived through the Holocaust, we can all understand and empathize with the Holocaust narratives that are so prolific in our culture. The history of the Holocaust has become inextricably linked to the history of the Western world.

When Spiegelman's first rendering of *Maus* was first published in 1972, it was in the form of an underground comic, and was not read by very many people. The first manifestation of *Maus* appeared in serialized form in Spiegelman's self-published RAW magazine. The audience of RAW was not very broad, and most likely did not consist of many survivors of the Holocaust. It was not until Spiegelman published the first volume in its entirety, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale I, My Father Bleeds History*, that any widespread notice was to take place. In 1986 Spiegelman released the first volume of *Maus* to mixed reviews – he was both praised and as noted, made a pariah. His work was revelatory and groundbreaking, and it was blasphemous and disrespectful – how could one create a comic book about the Holocaust? The truth of the matter is that *Maus* is seen as both a masterpiece and a stain on Holocaust narratives – it just depends upon whom you ask: “In a society which views comic books as *essentially* trivial, *Maus* thus might appear as a grotesque degradation of the Holocaust, mocking the catastrophic sufferings of millions of human beings as the squirming of cartoon rodents.” (Witek, 1989, p. 97).

Still Spiegelman was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for his work – a work that is situated within a history of autobiographical and ‘serious comix’ as well as other comics that have anthropomorphized animals in order to relay a sober message.

Animal comic books have generally been aimed at young readers, and their predominant mode is humour. But *Maus* is not the first animal comic book for adults. The underground comix gleefully plundered all comic-book genres, and the animal comics came in for their share of appropriation and parody...The thorough exploration of the conventions of animal comics comes in the work of Robert Crumb...[and] culminates in stories such as Crumb’s *The Goose and the Gander Were Talking One Night*.

In this story a suburban husband and wife discuss modern anxieties [after] they put their children to bed, [they] share a cup of tea, take a walk, and watch...television. The details of the setting are quintessentially bourgeois, with mismatched chairs around the kitchen table and homemade potholders hanging above the stove. But the characters themselves are geese; their feathery tails protrude from the backs of their jeans. They are aware that they are animals (the husband says ‘I’m a pretty average guy...just your normal everyday goose...’), but they think of themselves as human, too. The angst-ridden father says ‘Why do I think we’re doomed? Oh, I dunno...it’s everything, I guess...Just the way the human race keeps going head-on with population and technology an’ all that...’. The basic metaphor in [this story] functions as does the mouse-metaphor in Spiegelman’s work.

In Crumb’s story, the father’s feeling of helplessness in the face of the ‘collapse of this man-made system of things’ makes him feel as if he were as silly as a goose. His gooseness becomes part of the furniture of the story, enabling us to see past the intentional banality of the setting and conversation to the real-life situation it depicts; we are aware that these are talking geese even as we ignore the fact...Crumb superimposes the conventions of animal comics onto a mundane and threatening modern world. In *Maus*, Spiegelman’s extension of the animal metaphor from Crumb’s kind of satiric social commentary into history, biography, and autobiography was made possible by the underground comix, which first showed that the ‘funny animals’ could open up the way to a paradoxical narrative realism. (Witek, 1989, pp. 110-111).

It turns out that Spiegelman’s was no ordinary *comic book*. While the Pulitzer Prize lends tremendous credibility to his work, there are still some who

do not see the validity of his artistic expression. That is what makes great works what they are – there is no great art that does not inspire us to question and debate what it is that makes them what they are. Great works are often more likely to divide audiences, than bring them together. However, the discussion about what defines great art is not the task at hand. Spiegelman’s work speaks for itself – whether one is a fan or a detractor of his work – *Maus* stands on its own. What he was able to do was literally groundbreaking: “Spiegelman create[s] generically incongruent forms in order to break down the cognitive and emotional barriers that keep the past safely in the past.” (Gubar, 2003, p. 56). Spiegelman more than succeeded in pulling the past into the present, and preserving his father’s narrative for the future. His work has been investigated and analyzed through various disciplines, and the consensus is that he has indeed created a new way of telling stories about memory and about the Holocaust. Spiegelman took the documentary aspects of photography (ie. journalism, war photography) and the language of narrative and story-telling and combined them in an intelligent and profound style that no one could have imagined. The comic book, the graphic novel, combined these various aspects and elevated the genre of *serious* and autobiographical comics.

The comic book displays its potential as a sophisticated literature by extending the elements of two important forms of Holocaust representations: written memoir and photography. Both of these forms seek to capture some truth about the Holocaust, and they do so with limited success – especially the latter. By taking full advantage of the graphic language of the comic book, Spiegelman creates a powerful new narrative model that recognizes the complexities of retelling this history. Spiegelman explores and extends two main features of these particular Holocaust representations: the act of ‘bearing witness’ (and all that act

implies) in a written memoir, and the narrative possibilities and limitations of photographs that have come to largely define popular understanding of the Holocaust. In doing so, Spiegelman shows that rather than diminishing the Holocaust, the comic book is uniquely suited to bring about a deeper understanding of that particular history. (Versaci, 2007, p. 83).

Spiegelman's *Maus* works as history, narrative and story, in that he combined all aspects of these forms and brought them together in a new and memorable way that was at the time, yet unseen.

Of Maus and Memory

Art Spiegelman created his work from a place of 'postmemory', says James Young. The work of Spiegelman, the point of view of the 'second generation', does not lack or necessarily add, to the original memory. It has evolved through distance – time, space, and place – but it is valid unto itself. In its honesty, in its structure, Spiegelman's story is again as much about himself as it about his father and family – about postmemory.

I would not suggest that postmemory takes us beyond memory, or displaces it in any way, but would say that it is 'distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Post-memory should reflect back on memory, revealing it as equally constructed, equally mediated by the process of narration and imagination...Post-memory is anything but absent or evacuated: It is as full and as empty as memory itself.' (Young, 2001, p. 15).

In the case of *Maus*, it is as *full* as memory itself. In some ways *Maus* has exceeded the memory of Vladek, inasmuch as it has added to it the story of Spiegelman himself, and in doing so created another level of experience and meaning for another generation of readers – a new audience. Postmemory is

akin to collective memory, the evolution of memory. It is how memory and narrative are shaped and preserved: it is how history is written.

There are also numerous devices that Spiegelman incorporated into his work. Again his anthropomorphizing of the animal kingdom might be questioned – how does it better tell, or reinforce the narrative? Beyond comic strips and graphic novels, long before the work of Spiegelman or Crumb, there exists a tradition of telling stories through the eyes of animal figures – non-humans who take on human character traits and actions. There is a longstanding tradition of fairytale literature and folk tales in European and many other cultures. First Nations societies in North America anthropomorphized animals and their spirits in their oral traditions, as have many other indigenous cultures. The devices that Spiegelman employed have long been used in the telling of stories. In the instance of *Maus*, Spiegelman has taken the content of narrative to a new level of storytelling, and has enhanced the Holocaust narrative through his use and choice of ciphers – and his use of postmemory.

Spiegelman maintains that the stylization of *Maus* is the very thing that enables him to write an authentic Holocaust narrative at all. He told an interviewer:

If one considers the kind of stuff with people, it comes out wrong. And the way it comes out wrong is, first of all, I've never lived through anything like that...and it would be counterfeit to try to pretend that the drawings are representations of something that's actually happening. I don't know what a German looked like who was in a specific small town doing a specific thing. My notions are born of a few score of photographs and a couple of movies. I'm bound to do something inauthentic.

Also I'm afraid that if I did it with people, it would be very corny. It would come out as some kind of odd plea for sympathy or 'Remember the Six Million', and that wasn't my point exactly, either. To use these ciphers, the cats and mice, is actually a way to allow you past the cipher at the people who are experiencing it. So it's really a much more direct way of dealing with the material. (Witek, 1989, p. 102).

In essence, Spiegelman is working within Tim O'Brien's structure of story-truth/happening-truth. In order to capture and depict the fundamental nature of the story – of the reality of Vladek's narrative – Spiegelman has side-stepped the realism that traditional imagery would incorporate. As a graphic artist and an illustrator Spiegelman used his tools and his language, to represent, show, and tell a story.

To draw a realistic representation of Auschwitz would attempt to bring popular reductive images to a medium in which "realism" is highly relative. Comics stock in trade is not "realism" but impressionism. Knowing this, Spiegelman employs a brilliant minimalist style, which is a prime example of "amplification through simplification", whereby the comic book artist 'strip[s] down an image to its central meaning [and] amplify[ies] that meaning in a way that realistic art can't'. (Versaci, 2007, p. 102).

Another device and design element that is utilized to reinforce the 'reality' of the narrative, the content of the narrative, is a shifting of illustration styles – we move from cats and mice, back to humans, then back to animals again at one point – and even see the use of real photography.

Maus I contains a real photo within its pages – of Art's mother Anja – in a 'cartoon within a cartoon' entitled *Prisoner on the Hell Planet*. The strip deals specifically with Spiegelman and his reaction to his mother's suicide. The comic...and the photo within it remind the reader that this is a true story, that the characters represent real people, that the comic is, as Spiegelman has insisted outside as well as within the covers of *Maus*, nonfiction. In *Maus II* a photo of Vladek and Anja's lost son Richieu produces the same effect. Far

from disrupting narrative...the photograph attempts to make history and comic one seamless reality within narrative. Through narrative, experience and memory are transferable between persons...In the practical work of forging narrative connections with the past, then, one's *own* memory becomes irrelevant; someone else's narrative provides the material for one's own. (Hungerford, 1999, pp. 116-117, 120).

Despite the potential of the comic book form to detract from the content, Spiegelman takes any potential weakness and turns it into great strength – under his expert execution within his cartoon – but it is the narrative in *Maus* that succeeds where it may have failed under a lesser artist, less deft in skill and understanding. *Maus* is different.

Maus differs from other comic-book tellings of history, with their [often] didactic, persuasive, or sensational impulses. Jack Johnson's *Texas* histories both educate readers about forgotten heroes from the past and confront the origins of problems which have formed our present; Harvey Kurtzman's E.C. antiwar histories use thrilling war stories to argue against glamorization of militarism. But *Maus* is not an educational comic in the traditional sense of teaching facts; it exploits the familiarity of one of the central events of Western civilization to tell a very personal story. Nor does Spiegelman's approach in *Maus* resemble standard comic-book formulas, such as horror and adventure. The horrific reality of the Nazi extermination camps is ill suited to the often puerile conventions of adventure comics...What saves *Maus* from trivializing or sentimentalizing its difficult and emotional subject is its often ruthless examination of the psychologies of Vladek and of Art and the graphic simplicity of Spiegelman's style...In doing so he embarks on a project which ultimately proves that sequential art is a medium whose potential for truth-telling is limited only by the imagination and the honesty of the men and women who use it. (Witek, *Comic Books as History*, pp. 117-118).

Spiegelman's impressionistic style is used as a creative device where *less* is indeed *more*. By eliminating any whimsical attempt toward the recreation of geographic space and place, the reader can and does concentrate much more

on the larger themes *and* the actual story being told. As noted there are a few places where the reader is brought back to 'reality' – the insertion of the previously mentioned *Prisoner of the Hell Planet* (the comic strip within the strip) and the use of actual photographs within the narrative. This *reminds* readers that the story drawn out before them – the bold, black lines that form the characters of cats, mice, pigs, et al. – while a graphic depiction – is indeed a story rooted firmly in reality: the reality and the tragedy of the Holocaust and the Second World War. The at first blank looking stares from the black eyes of the mice, so simple in design, are really filled with expression that rivals any realistic representation. Spiegelman's perpetual cigarette dangling from his mouth, Vladek peering over his glasses, and the countless frames of Spiegelman and Vladek together, talking, fighting, learning, all take the reader into a very *human* account of the story carefully positioned within the pages of *Maus*. The use of black and white imagery, as opposed to a colour strip, also heightens the awareness of the reader. Once again there is no attempt to embellish or exaggerate: like Levi the facts speak for themselves. Sometimes the truth is simply enough: sometimes story-truth is truer than happening-truth.

In the end, Spiegelman's father and mother survived the turmoil and trauma of the Holocaust, and it was inevitable that their experience would shape their lives and the life of their American born son. Though Spiegelman had no first hand experience inside war torn Europe, he had a direct line into the memory of his parents. In some ways, their memories became his memories too, in the same way that the memories of my father are deeply connected to my

own. Many years after *Maus* was written, during the aftermath of September 11, 2001, Spiegelman finds himself more understanding of his parents' struggle, alongside the European Jewry that faced the earliest attacks against themselves and their communities.

Within the pages of *In the Shadow of No Towers*, Spiegelman tackled the chaos and disorder of a post 9-11 New York City, home to Spiegelman, his wife, and their two children. It seemed that for the first time Spiegelman was able to fit together the pieces of space, place, memory, history, into the ongoing puzzle that was his relationship to Vladek and Anja, and to their collective past. "You know I've called myself a 'rootless cosmopolitan', equally homeless anywhere on the planet? I was wrong...I *finally* understand why some Jews didn't leave Berlin right after Kristallnacht!" (Spiegelman, 2004, p. 4). Spiegelman was connecting his life to the past of his father and mother, in that moment for the first time again. That line struck me deeply the first time I read it. It is often so very difficult to put ourselves into the reality of another. Remove oneself from the comfort of modern life in the 2000s, and how distant, remote, and unfathomable that the lives of camp prisoners at Auschwitz seem to any one of us. It is impossible to know exactly what it was like. Living in New York City on September 11, 2001, while it was an experience very different than anything during the Second World War, would have given Spiegelman a glimpse into the lunacy and the inhumanity of a world gone mad. Days later while he, his family, and millions of New Yorkers (and the rest of the Western world) tried to make sense of it all, Spiegelman's empathy with the Jews in Berlin who suffered during Kristallnacht speaks

volumes about space and place and physical and psychic geography. This too speaks to the power of experience and puts history, narrative, and story into context once again. While written narrative can and does preserve and evoke events and emotions, lived experience is the ultimate *story*. I read *In the Shadow of No Towers*, as I read newspapers, magazines, journals and internet sources in the days following September 11, 2001, but I wasn't there, so I can never really know what it was like. A thousand people in New York on that fated day have a thousand stories to tell – all similar, all different. September 11 became a bridge for Spiegelman, from his experience on that day (and thereafter) to that of his parents during the Second World War.

It is of interest to note that in the timeliness and immediacy of Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers*, he never puts an explicit face to, or speculates much about the 'enemy'. After a lifetime, growing up, hearing stories of the Second World War, Spiegelman was easily able to put a face to the Nazis through his 'cat and mouse' metaphor. While Spiegelman most certainly had time to reflect upon those who masterminded the attack on the Twin Towers, the story he tells is about the day the violence came crashing down, and the very short term thereafter. Spiegelman was able to capture the essence of an 'unknown' enemy, simply because in the days after the 9-11 attacks, no one knew who was responsible – in some ways that makes the enemy ever more frightening. How can one fight the enemy, if the enemy is invisible? And so it must have been to the German Jews in the aftermath of Kristallnacht – many must have asked, 'Who is responsible for these unbelievably terrible deeds?' And in the days after

the savage attacks against German Jewry it must have seemed beyond belief that other human beings, fellow countrymen, friends and neighbours, could be responsible for the brutality and chaos of the aftermath of Kristallnacht.

Spiegelman captures the sense of fear and anxiety of the 'unknown', particularly by leaving out the *cause*, and only discussing the *effect*.

The Meaning of Maus

Spiegelman's work is an evolution and extension of the work of Primo Levi and the others who wrote between the Second World War and the early 1970s when Spiegelman adapted his first version of the *Maus* story. The graphic novel was the perfect vehicle to emphasize and enhance certain aspects of storytelling through a visual and textual media. While at first it may have seemed to overwhelm the narrative, and at the same time it may have been seen to undermine the significance and suffering of the survivor experience, we now agree that the content and form are equally and powerfully balanced – akin to Levi's work by much more than what separates it. Spiegelman's craft honours and is an homage the work of Levi, the story of his father Vladek, and many others – those who survived as well as those who perished. Spiegelman allows the reader to see, about that which Levi had written.

The viewer fills in what the picture leaves out: The horror of looking is not necessarily in the image but in the story we provide to fill in what is left out of the image...In *Maus*, Spiegelman retells the conditions of which Levi speaks by incorporating drawn images that do not overwhelm but emphasize the story being told. (Versaci, 2007, p. 95).

Discussions and debate about Holocaust expression elevated once *Maus* / was published in 1986 – prior to that publication, there was no discussion about *Holocaust comics*. The discussions and investigations of Spiegelman’s work apply to many other aspects of storytelling – narrative and history and storytelling. *Maus* has become much more than a comic book about the Holocaust, because that would be trite: Spiegelman’s work is dense, layered, intelligent, and extremely complex. It is a story about relationships and the challenges contained within the relationship of father and son. Spiegelman’s story is about his relationship with his father, it is about my relationship with my father, perhaps all children and fathers (and mothers too, let us not forget Anja). It surpasses the simple notion of a ‘comic book about the Holocaust’.

A comic-strip history of the Holocaust’ isn’t quite right: such a characterization is begging for trouble – or for misunderstanding. This is no Cliff Notes digest of the despicable schemings of Hitler and Himmler...Rather *Maus* is at once novel, a documentary, a memoir, an intimate retelling of the Holocaust story as it was experienced by Spiegelman’s father, who recounts the story to his son, Art. [His] relationship with his father is a continual torment, a mutual purgatory of disappointment, guilt and recrimination. This relationship is as much the focus of Art’s story as his father’s reminiscence...*Maus* is subtitled *A Survivor’s Tale*, but the question of *which* survivor is left to hover. (Weschler, 2007, p. 69).

Spiegelman’s story, his narrative, does not lead or instruct the reader; his work poses questions, but does not necessarily provide answers. It is a guidebook, not an operator’s manual: life and relationships aren’t that simple or easy – for any of us. From the ashes that had become Vladek’s life, Vladek’s story, Spiegelman’s *Maus* was the phoenix: he gave birth to an idea that had to become. In a similar way to that of Levi – who felt a need and responsibility to

bear witness – Spiegelman was bearing witness to his life, and his experience. As a member of the second generation, on some level, he lives in the shadow of the Holocaust every day. And it seems entirely apparent within the pages of *Maus*, that the process of interviewing and documenting Vladek’s story (and Anja’s life/death) was not only Spiegelman trying to make sense of his world, his life, but it was also an attempt to reach out, connect, and better understand his father. “A reader might get the impression that the conversations depicted in the narrative were just one small part, a facet of my relationship with my father. In fact, however, they were my relationship with my father. I was doing them *to have a relationship with my father*. Outside of them, we were still continually at loggerheads.” (Weschler, 2007, pp. 79-80). Spiegelman was reaching back in time, through Vladek’s narrative, in an attempt to understand history – where he came from, how he came to be who he was, and why. Spiegelman held up a lens to the existence of the second generation, and to all others who would come to learn more about the dark period of our past – the Holocaust. Like Levi, Spiegelman too wrote because he was compelled to write.

As a brilliant graphic and visual artist Spiegelman chose a media in which he was familiar and extremely skilled. Nearly 30 years after Levi wrote his first book, times had changed. And as a young man in 1960s America, Spiegelman was using his tools and points of reference to adapt a story, that for him could be told in no other way. A comic book about the Holocaust. “I was trying to deal with what was important to me in the medium that was best suited for me to tackle it through.” (Ryan, 2007, p. 303). In telling his story, his father’s story, in the form of

a graphic novel Spiegelman has changed the ways in which we tell stories yet again.³²

The lines that separate fact from fiction need to be scrupulously observed, therefore, lest the tendency to reject the Holocaust be encouraged by reducing it altogether to the realm of the fictive. In *Maus*, Spiegelman calls attention to this line, which exists not only between fact and fiction but also between reality and representation, and he does so using the comic book that is uniquely suited to raise these questions. By demonstrating that they can be a powerful model for historical understanding of the Holocaust, Spiegelman makes a persuasive case for the literary value of comics. For in the end, he shows that comics' graphic language and its particular brand of self-consciousness are able to retain a firm and responsible connection to the voices of those who survived and the memories of those who did not. (Versaci, 2007, p. 104).

So where does the art of storytelling go from here? Spiegelman's *serious comix* have entered and now occupy a place of respect within our culture and society, as have the works of many other comic book artists and graphic novelists. But what is the future of storytelling in the 21st century – what does the future hold, and what will it reveal in terms of narrative, history, story? To whom will we tell our stories? In the end, who will know them – repeat them – remember them?

³² Graphic novels and animation have most certainly been a pervasive art form used to situate cultural context and to critique societies in the 20th century and beyond. One of the most interesting and 'serious' narratives to emerge is Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*. It recently surfaced as a bold and outspoken narrative on the deep-rooted cultural norms, political violence, and suffocation and terror of the Iranian world in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Satrapi first told her story in the form of the award winning graphic novel, and more recently in the multi-award winning animated film.

CHAPTER 5: IN THE END

Afterimage

We cannot touch the eyes of another, or the leaves of the trees, without touching their fragility. We cannot make contact with the skin of another, or the pebbles of the river, without sensing their porousness. We cannot lie with another, or under the clouds, without suffering their impermanence. Our touch understands the transience of the silver-filigreed wings of the flies and the opaque leaves of the moribund giant sequoias, of the polyps in the muck of the deep oceans, and the celestial constellations burning themselves out as fast as they can. – Alphonso Lingis

I have always found a stunning depth and profundity in the words of Alphonso Lingis. As a philosopher and phenomenologist, Lingis has the unique ability to create a mood and to capture the penetrating essence of ideas and words and things. Through the use of ideas and words and things, we assemble narratives and stories. Not only is Lingis a philosopher and a phenomenologist, but he too is a poet. To describe his work as poetry might seem to downplay his extraordinary intellectual insights, however his work indeed captures a *beauty* and *truth* that are nothing short of poetic. Lingis is a gifted writer, a wordsmith, and of course a storyteller. His role in my work here has been to signpost and guide my ideas and to help me *feel* my way through this work, through my own story.

I've written much about my father, his family, and the beginnings of our collective history in Canada. On my mother's side, the story too is very similar. I am third generation Canadian on both sides of my family. Though my parents

met one another in British Columbia, their families both settled in the prairies. At one time my great-grandparents on both sides, lived approximately 50 kilometres apart – my father’s side in Saskatchewan, my mother’s in Manitoba. The story of my mother’s family is familiar to me inasmuch as I can relate what I know about the immigrant experience to her family’s past. I am not able to write about it in any detail, because unfortunately I do not know most of the stories of her past – her family’s past – in the same way that I know the stories of my father. The oral history on my mother’s side has been ‘documented’ somewhat by her mother, my grandmother, but I have not often heard or learned those stories. This is a prime example in my life of how the narratives alone (the oral history, the stories) have not survived. Without further documentation, the history of my mother’s family stands to be lost in the very near future.

The irony is that in all aspects, I have been much closer and know members of my mother’s family far better than those on my father’s side. My paternal grandfather, Walter, died the summer before I was born. His wife, my grandmother Helen, lived in Saskatchewan her entire life and only visited BC a handful of times while I was growing up. I spent very few weeks of my childhood on the prairies – just a few visits during the summer holidays. I have come to know most of the members of my father’s family as an adult, starting in my early 20s.

While I really don’t know many of the details of their past, my mother’s parents were an extremely integral part of my life as a child, and still are today. My maternal grandfather, Timothy, died in 2001, but he and I shared a

connection and closeness during his lifetime that remains with me always. We first bonded when I was very young, at a time when my grandfather lived with my family for a short while. He was, for several months, my daily companion and best friend. He never forgot about those early days we shared together, those common experiences, and he asked me about them almost every time I saw him. He would always ask: “Do you remember the black cloud?” and I always answered, “Yes”. My grandfather is very nearly a figure of mythical stature and importance to me. While he was far from perfect, as we all are, his life was lived honestly and with purpose. I knew him as a grandfather, a parent, a choir leader, a musician, a storyteller, and so much more. Yet as well as I knew him, at his funeral I realized there was so much that I never knew about him. Members of his community spoke generously, kindly and proudly about a man I had not known. On that bittersweet day, in hearing the words of his eulogy, in hearing his friends, colleagues and confidantes speak, I learned and heard things that deepen my understanding of my grandfather. He was not a perfect man, he was not a man without fault, but I was fortunate to know my grandfather as human, imperfect in his struggle. He was a good man and I am better for having known him.

My maternal grandmother, Anne, is still living and she too is always with me – I am constantly reminded of the life lessons that I learned from her long ago. My grandmother is a woman of tremendous strength, humour, and courage – and she has lived her life guided by principles of honesty and integrity. Her life growing up on the Canadian prairies was not easy, and her resilient spirit and

sense of humour have served her well for nearly 90 years. I remember endless summers spent at her home in southern BC – the enormous garden where she grew all of her own fruit and vegetables, the honey farm down the dirt road where her neighbour Michael used to give me sweet pieces of honeycomb to chew upon, and the gently flowing river in which my cousins and I used to swim. I ate fresh berries from her garden and helped her pick fruits and vegetables. When I was very young she scratched my back and sang me to sleep on her hard bed. When I was older I split firewood for her in the summer knowing it would keep her warm in the cold winter months ahead. My grandmother is perhaps a soul mate and I have felt an unbreakable bond with her since I was a very young boy. She taught me about honesty, courage and discipline. She has lived her life by example – a kind and generous woman who gave much more than she ever received. Now as she inhabits the twilight of her life, I am reminded so often about who she was and still is to me. She is never far from my thoughts these days and her presence is with me always. As a young boy my entire life was ahead of me, and as that boy, I thought somehow I might just live forever. My life then was indeed timeless, and time seemed to me, quite possibly eternal. Now I *know* that time is in fact never ending – and perhaps so too is life? – though not as I have come to know it here on this earth.

Our memory, our mind's eye, is in some ways all we really have. Our entire lives are lived in the past – at first the immediate past – an instant flashes just behind us as moments of our lives are defined. Later to be recalled, perhaps over and over again, as the living memory of *one* particular moment – of the flash

– it becomes part of our history, part of our narrative, our story. Two people – one speaking, the other listening – by the time the speaker has released their words to be heard, the moment has literally vanished. The listener needs time to hear, and then internalize the speaker’s words: another moment has passed. We speak about events happening in ‘real time’ and somehow we have a sense of the ‘present’ in that idea – when really it is the immediate past – and becomes farther and farther from the moment as other moments come rushing in to take its place. We will constantly replay the events of a moment in our head – the birthday party, the opera, the countless hospital visits, the funeral. Moments like these have become part of my personal history, part of my narrative and story.

It is very rare to describe the events of one moment in real time, and more importantly it’s impossible to be *reflective* in real time. We tend to recall the day’s events, or the previous evening, long after the moments have disappeared. It is impossible to grasp the moment and understand it without some reflection – and once we have done so, the moment has vanished.

What is the role and responsibility of the historian, of the storyteller? Primo Levi’s first person narrative, *If This Is a Man*, has survived for more than 60 years because of the tremendous power and rhetoric contained within its pages. Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* too has survived for more than 25 years, for similar reasons – but how long will they remain in the consciousness of our culture? Our documented history, the written details of our lives have not been around for very long. The world is full of books – literally full of books – full of history, full of stories. But how many of these stories do we know – how many can one person

know in a lifetime – how many books can I read, how many can I remember – and what about my own stories? In the case of Levi, he documented the experience of a camp survivor during the Holocaust. Whether one believes it is the most effective and enduring way of documenting survivor testimony is at once both important and of no consequence in terms of Levi's work. As survivors of the Holocaust (and other atrocities) die, their stories die with them. While *If This Is a Man* tells everyone's story on some level, it too only tells only one – the story that Levi wrote. Most Holocaust survivors did not write memoirs or narratives – Vladek Spiegelman did not – how many others did not? We can never really know. How many of the six million who perished at the hands of the Nazis are still remembered? They are remembered collectively, as six million, but how many still know them and their memory as individuals? How many of us living today will be remembered? For those *who are* remembered, how long will they remain alive in the memories of future generations? While Levi is a symbol of sorts for remembrance, countless survivors have fallen away, have been forgotten, or were quite simply never known by most of the world. The challenge of documenting and preserving their narratives has fallen away with them. Most of us will pass into obscurity, despite our best efforts to tell and preserve our histories, our narratives, our stories. It seems that is simply the fate of most individuals – we're here on this earth for a very short time – we live, we love, we laugh, some of us hate, some of us perform evil deeds – and then eventually we all die: we take our stories with us when we go.

Proust suggested that our 'reality' is perhaps not quite what we may have thought. Our lives – however long or short – have been a delicate balance of past and present, held together in an unknown future, and in the end it escapes us all. Everything we thought we knew has moved, or slipped, or shifted away from us. We are separated from ourselves, because of our selves, because of our memories. We're here, on this earth for a short time – a very short time. Our lives, the very lives we live are all reduced to a short series of memories and stories: memories and stories at best. For once we have passed from this place to another – or perhaps to nowhere – our memories no longer remain, at least not in this place. If others live to remember us, our deeds, then we live on, for another short while. But eventually, most of us, will pass into anonymity. As many as 100 billion³³ people have lived on this planet before us – our ancestors. A mere six billion surround me now. How many of the 100 billion who have all lived, loved and laughed and cried are still remembered today? Without narrative, we all simply disappear. Through narrative and story, a few of us will survive in the memories of others for a while longer. The rest will grow up forgetting.

I saw a man walking. He was breaking ground in perfect silence. He wore a harness and pulled a plow. His feet trod his figure's blue shadow, and the plow cut a long blue shadow in the field. He turned back as if to check the furrow, or as if he heard a call. I saw another man on the plain to the north. This man walked slowly with a spade, and turned the green ground under. Then before me in the near distance I saw the earth itself walking, the earth walking dark and aerated as it always does in every season, peeling the light back: The earth was plowing the men under, and the spade, and the

³³ "The dead outnumber the living, Harvard's Nathan Keyfitz wrote in a 1991 letter to Justin Kaplan. 'Credible estimates of the number of people who have ever lived on earth run from 70 billion to [more than] 100 billion. Averaging those figures puts the total at about 85 billion. By these moderate figures the dead outnumber us (by now we have swelled to 5.9 billion) by about 14 to 1...The dead will always outnumber the living.'" (Dillard, 1999, p. 49).

plow. No one sees us go under. No one sees generations churn, or civilizations. The green fields grow up forgetting. (Dillard, 1999, p. 203).

It's difficult to remember, to hold the memory of another person closely, the memory of an event closely, it's much easier to forget. It takes effort to commit to one's thoughts, to solidify them in one's mind, to be vigilant in the act of remembering: it's much easier to forget, to grow up forgetting. The acts of documenting history, narrative and story are still relatively new to humankind. Our 'ancient' texts are not very old at all. The capacity to remember is fleeting, so we transcribe, we write, we document: for the time being that works best. How long the words of Primo Levi and Art Spiegelman will last still remains to be seen – perhaps they will last forever – but we will not. In 100 years what power will their words hold, what about in 1000 years? Will they be remembered at all? We string ourselves together with the narratives we create to tell the story of our lives. In the here and now, it would seem necessary, and it would seem enough. Our stories, though they will not last forever are all we have in the present and all we have to pass along to future generations. Even though we know they will not last, we continue to create history, narrative, and story – though we never forget that *our touch understands the transience* of humanity, and that the *constellations are burning themselves out as fast as they can*. We remember not only because we want to, but also because we have need to – because we must. *One has to remember*, for as long as one can, until we are no more.

The reality that I had known no longer existed...The places [and people] we have known do not belong only to the world of space on which we map them out for our own convenience. They were only a thin slice, held between the contiguous impressions that composed

our life at that time; the memory of a particular image is but regret for a particular moment; and houses, roads, avenues [and the people we have known] are as fugitive, alas, as the years. (Proust p. 606).

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