

THE PARADOX OF HOLOCAUST HUMOR: COMEDY THAT ILLUMINATES
TRAGEDY

by

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Abstract

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The use of humor in Holocaust art has provoked fervent debate. On one side are those who denounce it in the belief that it misrepresents the event and disrespects its victims. On the other side are those who believe that humor, especially in its darkest form, is uniquely suited to the representation of an event so inherently absurd and terrifying. This dissertation supports the latter position. It begins with an overview of humor theory, citing, among others, Hobbes, Kant, Freud, Bakhtin, and Des Pres. Humor is shown to be both a defense against persecution and a force for resistance and rebellion. The problematic aspects of memory, witnessing, and giving testimony are considered within the context of attempting to reconstruct history. The dissertation goes on to discuss the special nature of Jewish humor, which often focuses on the gap between the ideal of the Jews as a chosen people and the reality of Jewish historical experience. Following this are discussions of specific works—the first among them Kurt Vonnegut's *Mother Night*. Central to this novel is the kind of moral ambiguity so often present in Holocaust narrative. The protagonist, a

self-proclaimed apolitical man, accepts a job spying for the Allies; yet the job involves broadcasting inflammatory anti-Semitic propaganda. In *Mother Night* Vonnegut addresses the importance of behaving responsibly. The central figure in Leslie Epstein's *King of the Jews*, based on the head of the Lodz Ghetto Jewish Council, is enveloped in moral ambiguity, as well. Is he an egomaniacal tyrant interested only in self-glorification and in wielding power, or is he himself only a victim, trying to do his best under impossible circumstances? Next to be considered are the works of three Second-Generation authors: Art Spiegelman, Michael Chabon, and Thane Rosenbaum. It is shown that all three use humor, as well as magic, to respond to their Holocaust legacies. The transmission of memory and the phenomenon of secondhand witnessing are examined in this chapter. Finally, the dissertation addresses five film comedies that touch upon the Holocaust in varying degrees: *The Great Dictator*, *To Be or Not to Be*, *The Producers*, *Seven Beauties*, and *Life Is Beautiful*. It is shown that each one, through the use of very different types of humor, moved us forward in our ability to confront and contemplate a subject that remains largely incomprehensible.

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This dissertation is dedicated to Howard, Jordan, and Ilana—the loves of my life—and to John, my most recent extraordinary gift.

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Chapter 1

Holocaust Humor: Taming Terror

Mouse inmates at “Mauschwitz” terrorized by cat guards. S.S. troops cavorting like Keystone cops. A song-and-dance routine entitled “Springtime for Hitler.” These are some of the images that have shocked, puzzled, troubled, and sometimes amused us over the years since the Holocaust. The use of humor in Holocaust art has elicited a variety of responses—many of them negative. It has been called dishonest in that it distorts history and offensive in that it dishonors the victims. The representation of history is not as straightforward a matter as it might seem to be—a proposition that will be developed later in this chapter. For now, suffice it to say that history, or reality, was distorted by the event itself. The moral and ethical norms of civilization vanished, and in their absence life became unpredictable, terrifying, and absurd. Dark humor, with its focus on the terrifying and absurd, might be invaluable—even necessary—for representing this distorted reality.

Philosophers, scholars, and critics have been considering the nature and functions of humor for centuries. Contemporary humor theorist John Morreall has written a survey of their writings. He begins with Plato, who thought that we laugh at “vice, particularly self-ignorance, in people who are relatively powerless” (Morreall, *Philosophy* 10).

Morreall notes that Aristotle agreed with Plato in seeing laughter as a form of derision. Much later, in the sixteenth century, Thomas Hobbes elaborated on Plato and Aristotle by articulating what has come to be known as the Superiority Theory of humor. Hobbes wrote that laughter is “nothing but an expression of our sudden glory when we realize that in some way we are superior to someone else” (Morreall, *Philosophy* 19).

In another work Morreall addresses ridicule within the context of the Superiority Theory. Ridicule, he states, originated when people laughed at opponents who had been injured or defeated in battle. Before long, it was directed at those who merely *appeared* to be vulnerable to defeat. Eventually, it evolved to include laughter at oneself (*Taking* 7).

During the Nazi era, the Jews were subjected to severe ridicule, yet they clandestinely used the same weapon against their tormentors. Joseph Goebbels, one of the worst of them, was ridiculed for “his diminutive size (he was known as ‘Wotan's Mickey Mouse’), his affected speaking style (‘Mahatma Propagandhi’), and his clubfoot (‘Humpelstilzchen’)” (Lipman 40).

They ridiculed themselves, as well, as in this joke referring to alleged Jewish passivity and aversion to confrontation:

Two Jews are about to enter the gas chamber
in Auschwitz. One of them turns to the S.S. guard
to make a last request for a glass of water.

“Shah, Moshe,” says the friend, “Don't make
trouble.” (Lipman 193)

Although Steve Lipman writes that black humor during the Holocaust was uncommon, it clearly was not unknown.

A second theory of humor is the Incongruity Theory, which holds that “amusement is an intellectual reaction to something that is unexpected, illogical, or inappropriate in some other way” (Morreall, *Taking* 15). Aristotle tentatively connected laughter to incongruity, but the connection was more fully developed by Immanuel Kant,

who wrote that “Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing” (Morreall, *Taking* 16). Arthur Schopenhauer, another important proponent of the Incongruity Theory, refined it further, writing that our expectation is not totally thwarted, but rather met by something unanticipated.

A third theory of humor, the Relief Theory, places laughter in its physiological context; it considers laughter to be the release of excess psychic energy (Morreall, *Philosophy* 6). This is pertinent to Holocaust humor since, as Morreall points out, those living under repressive regimes are especially likely to be burdened by pent-up psychic energy (*Taking* 21). Alan Dundes, in an essay entitled “Auschwitz Jokes,” confirms the critical role of humor in helping people cope with not only repression, but the constant threat of imminent death.

Freud is perhaps the most important proponent of the Relief Theory. For him, jokes act like dreams, in that they allow a release of energy that otherwise would be needed to repress unacceptable aggressive or sexual thoughts. In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, he divides jokes into two types: tendentious and non-tendentious. The non-tendentious, or innocent, joke can be taken at face value; it contains no double meanings that mask intentions. Its purpose is to entertain. Freud describes the tendentious joke as “either a *hostile* joke (serving the purpose of aggressiveness, satire, or defense) or an *obscene* joke (serving the purpose of exposure)” (Freud 115). It also serves the purpose of enlisting the listener against the object of the joke. “By making our enemy small, inferior, despicable or comic, we achieve in a roundabout way the enjoyment of overcoming him—to which the third person, who has made no efforts, bears witness by his laughter” (Freud 122).

The Superiority Theory is at work here, as well. (In truth, the theories often overlap.) Though our enemy may be powerful, we still may privately view him as “small” and “inferior”; we may feel essentially superior to him. The following is another joke popular during the Nazi era:

A Jew is walking down a street in
Berlin when he accidentally brushes against
a storm trooper.

“Swine,” roars the Nazi.

“Epstein,” says the Jew, bowing. (Lipman 175)

Nazi propaganda attempted to exalt the Nazi and dehumanize the Jew. This Jewish joke turns the tables; the Nazi is portrayed as a brute and the Jew as a gentleman. Such a joke allows the teller to momentarily reclaim his feeling of equality with or superiority to the Nazi. During that moment the roles of victim and oppressor are vicariously reversed. Even the victims who were in the direst straits—the prisoners of the ghettos and camps—exchanged jokes and humorous stories that reflected confidence and defiance. Steve Lipman states the tacit message: “The Nazis are intellectually and morally inferior, sure to suffer ultimate loss and disgrace” (63-64).

Mikhail Bakhtin did not address the question of what causes us to laugh; rather, he addressed the place of humor in society. His focus is more political than psychological. In *Rabelais and His World* he envisions two types of culture: low, or carnival culture, and officially sanctioned high culture. He stresses the importance of the former over the latter. Bakhtin was a champion of the common man, or the “folk,” and his folk were rebellious rather than compliant. He considered the carnival of the folk—

unsanctioned by the forces in power—to be revolutionary. Carnival laughter, rich in irreverence and parody, broke up officially propagated lies and allowed hope to replace fear. Holocaust humor served much the same purpose. Michael Holquist writes of how Bakhtin understood “how necessary to the pursuit of liberty is the courage to laugh.” He writes, further, that *Rabelais and His World* is “finally about freedom, the courage needed to establish it, the cunning required to maintain it, and—above all—the horrific ease with which it can be lost” (Bakhtin xxi). The writers of much of the body of work that we call Holocaust literature understood this as well as Bakhtin did.

Carnival laughter frequently featured the grotesque, and even so dark an element as this is cast in a positive light by Bakhtin. It continued to serve as a force for rebellion long after the time of Rabelais. For example, Bakhtin writes of the Gothic or black novel, which he identifies as a variety of the “new grotesque” that emerged during the Romantic era. He calls the Romantic grotesque “a reaction against the elements of classicism which characterized the self-importance of the Enlightenment.” It was, to Bakhtin, “a reaction against cold rationalism, against official, formalistic and logical authoritarianism; it was a rejection of that which is finished and completed, of the didactic and utilitarian spirit of the Enlighteners with their narrow and artificial optimism” (Bakhtin 37).

Optimism, of course, became increasingly difficult to sustain or justify as history unfolded. World War I ushered in a time of profound disillusionment, evoked in the literature of the Lost Generation. World War II, encompassing both the Holocaust and Hiroshima, elevated disillusionment to despair. The existentialists put forth an absurdist vision, which grew from “man's desire to find meaning in an unreasonable universe.” They wrote that “without transcendental or cosmic justification, man is without purpose,

his actions senseless—he becomes absurd” (Pratt xvii).

Twentieth-century black humor grew out of this absurdist vision. There is no clear consensus over what, exactly, constitutes black humor. Alan Pratt, editor of *Black Humor*, offers two defining characteristics: “Black humor involves the humorous treatment of what is grotesque, morbid, or terrifying. And while it bitterly ridicules institutions, value systems, and traditions, black humor offers neither explicit nor implicit proposals for improving, reforming, or changing the painful realities on which it focuses” (xix). There is a fundamental incongruity at the heart of black humor; it is “the comic treatment of material which resists comic treatment”(O'Neill 74). Black humor aims to subvert pain by injecting jokes into tragic situations. As one critic notes, “a perverse cause-effect relation seems to be the goal. If happiness provokes laughter, then perhaps laughter can provoke happiness” (Zolten 306).

Pratt characterizes black-humor protagonists as “typically picaresque antiheroes, caricatures of the innocent, inept, depraved, or insane”(xxi). Among the traditional comic techniques this type of humor uses to achieve its ends are parody, non sequitur, travesty, burlesque, exaggeration, and understatement. Wordplay is also a useful tool, since “it is the perfect means to convey disorder, for it breaks the accepted linguistic conventions of normal speech, and it is a means to play with the patterns and create a new form of its own” (Winston 260). Pratt notes that “experimentation . . . typically involves rapidly shifting narratives and hazy boundaries between reality, hallucination, and fantasy” (xxii). Black humorists disdain primness and hypocrisy; they generally consider any target fair game.

Humor theorist Patrick O'Neill has identified five basic “modes of articulation” of black humor: the satiric, the ironic, the grotesque, the absurd, and the parodic. “Satire,” he

says, is “the soil in which black humor takes root.” In O’Neill’s schema, black humor is largely based on the relationship between the real and the ideal. (This relationship plays a substantial role in Jewish humor, as well. The incongruity between the ideal of chosenness and the reality of Jewish experience has lent itself to countless mordant jokes and stories. This will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter 2 of this dissertation.)

Satire ranges from benign, “firmly and tolerantly anchored in its own value-system” and confident that it can move the real toward the ideal; through derisive, “where the emphasis begins to shift from the didactic to the punitive”; to black, where there is “an emphatic lack of belief in its own efficacy as an agent of moral education, and didactic confidence gives way to a fascinated vision of maximum entropy, total disorder” (O’Neill 75). When the gap separating the real from the ideal begins to appear unbridgeable, when humor begins to be “self-consciously aware of the futility of its own gestures towards the reconciliation of opposites,” black humor emerges— “not any longer as a force of reconciliation, but as one of subversion or defiance” (O’Neill 73).

O’Neill notes that irony may be thought of as “an existential mode, a way of looking at life.” He differentiates between satire and irony in that satire is characterized by “moral militancy” while irony is characterized by “detached observation.” Irony tends to be subtle, and it often makes use of understatement. Like satire it “focuses on the discrepancy between the real and the ideal.” (O’Neill goes so far as to call irony a bridge between the tragic and the comic.) He notes the work of Bergson, which “schematically suggested that, while humor emphasizes the real, irony emphasizes the ideal, and satire attempts to bring them together.” O’Neill elaborates, “while humor points to the real, that is, and laughs, benignly or derisively, at its deficiencies, irony points to the gap separating the real from the ideal, and embodies that disjunction in the inauthentic discourse of ambiguity.” As the

gap widens to the point where the real appears to be irreconcilable with the ideal, irony turns toward the grotesque (O'Neill 76).

Rather than understatement, the grotesque operates through exaggeration—through “surprise rather than insinuation.” O'Neill describes the grotesque as emotional and irrational, whereas irony is intellectual and rational. He states that like the ironic, and like humor in general, the grotesque is based on incongruity, but that while humor and irony offer the possibility of resolution, the grotesque emphasizes the inevitability of irresolution. It reflects a threat to the individual as he tries to find his place in the world. O'Neill notes that the grotesque is defined by a balance between comedy and horror; without that balance, “the grotesque shades off into either broad and harmless comedy or unadulterated horror” (77).

He goes on to describe the grotesque as a “no man's land” between comedy and the absurd. While both tragedy and comedy are rooted in an orderly world, the grotesque represents “the incursion of disorder, typically associated with physical abnormalities, deformities, and perversions. . . . The grotesque points to the inhuman and the abyss.” O'Neill recalls Gerd Heniger, who saw black humor as “reaching its highest and most appropriate expression as it approaches ever closer to that abyss.” (O'Neill, however, believes that “once the comic element disappears we have left the realm of black humor.”) In the absurd mode, the ideal disappears altogether. The absurd is always an expression of black humor (O'Neill 78-79).

O'Neill identifies still another form of black humor: metahumor, which is characterized by a sense of values not quite lost, but parodied. He states that “in the fullest sense metahumor finds expression in that form of entropic comedy which is highly self-conscious, self-reflexive, and essentially marked by parody.” It is the humor of complicity,

of “keeping up the joke.” O’Neill writes that “metahumor in its full parodic sense is a play with paradox, self-deconstructive in that it is joyously affirmative though what it affirms is nothingness. . . . Metahumor teases disorder into parodic order. . . . Black humor is the humor of disorientation; metahumor is the humor of parodic reorientation” (O’Neill 81).

A question that might come to mind at this point is: What’s so funny about black humor? One answer is that the humor in black humor arises from the attitude of the writer, which may be, for example, detached or playful. As one critic points out, “nothing is humorous per se; . . . humor is an attitude, and . . . a thing is humorous, ridiculous, or laughable only because and when someone considers it so” (Halsey 113). Another critic points to the unique tone of black humor, in which the unsettling is combined with the amusing and horror is combined with fun. These feelings may not necessarily be experienced simultaneously, but the text must provoke both (Winston 256).

But, as suggested earlier in this chapter, black humor can do far more than amuse us. It has been noted that “there is . . . value in laughing at what is otherwise horrifying because this defends the personality from disturbing truths. Laughing at the anarchy of a disintegrating world steels one against the otherwise debilitating anguish of existential meaninglessness. The psychological benefits of black humor, then, include deeper insight and strengthened coping mechanisms” (Pratt xxiv). As John Morreall has said, while a person is laughing, he has freed himself from fear (Goldsmith 38).

Freud, too, viewed black humor as a kind of defense mechanism. It allows for the transformation of pain into pleasure. He wrote of humor, “The grandeur of it clearly lies in the triumph of narcissism, the victorious assertion of the ego’s invulnerability. The ego refuses to be distressed by the provocations of reality, to let itself be compelled to suffer. It insists that it cannot be affected by the traumas of the external world; it shows, in fact, that

such traumas are no more than occasions for it to gain pleasure” (qtd. in Goldsmith 46).

Similarly, Friedrich Nietzsche, writing at the end of the nineteenth century, recognized humor as a life-promoting value, antagonistic to the death drive (Goldsmith 61).

Another defense against suffering is assuming a humorous attitude toward not only the external world, but toward oneself (Morreall, *Philosophy* 114). This is at the heart of Jewish humor and will be explored in Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

Humor can be an instrument of resistance and rebellion as well as an instrument of defense, as, we have seen, Mikhail Bakhtin understood so well. Freud, too, wrote that “tendentious jokes are especially favored in order to make aggressiveness or criticism possible against persons in exalted positions who claim to exercise authority. The joke then represents a rebellion against that authority, a liberation from its pressure” (125).

Contemporary theorists recognize this characteristic of humor, as well. Gaetan Brulotte describes humor as “a socially disruptive force that challenges customs, conventions, morality, logic, transgressions, and taboos, and flouts law, undermining civilization and learning. It gives voice to impropriety, disrespect, aggression and the absurd. With laughter the social machine creaks, its herd-like unanimity falters, its habitual cohesion breaks up, and its mechanical reactions break down. Everything comes to a grinding halt. Skeptical, nihilistic, anarchic, it overturns the ambient system”(14). Brulotte notes that Hegel was especially wary of laughter; he felt it threatened the stability of civilizations. Brulotte sees it as a force for social progress. Political and social disruption are not necessarily bad. Holocaust humor threatened the stability of the Third Reich and was vigorously censored. Hitler had special “joke courts” established. Punishable crimes included naming dogs or horses “Adolph” (Morreall, *Taking* 102).

Humor provided a small means of resistance and a measure of hope to the Reich's victims.

Black humor may have an additional political value. Antonin J. Obrdlik spent nine months in Czechoslovakia under Nazi occupation. He reports that before the invasion, light-hearted jokes about the Nazis had been in circulation. They had helped to maintain morale at a time wracked by uncertainty. The jokes vanished upon Czechoslovakia's defeat, but only for a brief time. They resumed shortly, and Obrdlik concluded that "gallows humor is an unmistakable index of good morale and of the spirit of resistance of oppressed peoples." He further observed that black humor "strengthens resistance by bolstering the morale of victims and undermining the oppressors" (qtd. in Lewis 65). He warned, "Its decline or disappearance reveals either indifference or a breakdown of the will to resist evil" (qtd. in Lipman 64).

In a similar vein, Paul Lewis notes an episode in Simon Wiesenthal's *The Sunflower* in which the citizens of Lemberg commit an atrocity against the bodies of three Jews hanging in a public square. The local population regarded it as "only a joke." Wiesenthal remembers this characterization with outrage. At the same time, he recalls the jokes that lifted the spirits of the inmates enduring the horrors of the camps, and he acknowledges that a joke can bring "comfort to the comfortless," rendering it "a miracle of hope triumphant over reality," a "brief, tinsel miracle" (Lewis 67-68).

Laughter in Hell, Steve Lipman's landmark study of humor during the Holocaust, addresses, in depth, the positive value of humor for those inmates. It was a spiritual weapon against uncertainty, fear, and eventually, terror. "Wit produced on the precipice of hell," Lipman writes, "was not frivolity but psychological necessity." Furthermore, laughing together unites people, and humor in the ghettos and camps strengthened bonds

among trusted friends. It was also “a diversion, a shield, a morale booster, an equalizer, a drop of truth in a world founded on lies. In short, a cryptic redefining of the victims’ world” (Lipman 10).

Psychiatrist Victor Frankl, himself a Holocaust survivor, has written that, paradoxically, humor afforded detachment from one’s ordeal at the same time as it forced one to recognize it. He recounts the prisoners’ reaction to being shaved of all bodily hair. Some were in denial; but when they were all forced into the showers together, their denial, necessarily, crumbled. It was replaced, among many of the inmates, by a “grim sense of humor.” At least they were still alive. Frankl later utilized humor as a psychotherapeutic tool (Lipman 11; Morreall, *Taking* 104). Indeed, numerous psychiatrists and psychologists working with patients suffering from “survivor’s syndrome” after the war have reported that those with an intact sense of humor were better able to overcome the nightmares and guilt that plagued them (Lipman 20).

Humor appeared in many forms during the Nazi era—art, music, poetry, as well as jokes. In the journals that emerged from that era as well as the memoirs that were written afterward, humor holds a central place. Emmanuel Ringelblum, an established and respected historian and archivist and also a prisoner in the Warsaw Ghetto, felt compelled to record the details of Ghetto life. Jacob Sloan, in his Introduction to Ringelblum’s *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto*, writes, “Most of the notes are overpoweringly sober. But the common man in the Ghetto had his own way of relieving tension—by making up and telling jokes. The Notes tell dozens of these jokes—sardonic, bitter, violent, wishful. . . . These jokes have a desperate quality; [they are] a brilliant counterpoint to the dominant note of repressed anguish” (xxvi).

No subject—not even God himself—was off limits. It was not infrequently noted

that had Jesus been alive at the time, his Jewish parentage might have landed him in the camps. “Nazi pomposity, the spotless uniforms, the exaggerated reports of military triumphs, and the hyperbolic use of language” were irresistible targets. And even at this desperate time, there were glimmers of defiance and hope, such as in the popular saying “God forbid that the war lasts as long as the Jews are capable of enduring” (Lipman 192).

If no subjects were off limits to those experiencing the Holocaust, is it reasonable to impose limits on those trying to make the event comprehensible to generations to come? It was suggested at the beginning of this dissertation that the representation of history—especially the humorous representation of a tragic period in history—can be a complex, emotionally freighted endeavor. One could argue that at the heart of the problem is the relation of accuracy to authenticity (Bernard-Donals and Glejzer 4). Dori Laub, a psychiatrist who has extensively studied trauma and its attempted representation, has concluded that testimony that is less than historically accurate still can be authentic and valuable.

It is important to recognize that memory can be problematic. Laub has written that “massive trauma precludes its registration” (Felman and Laub 57). With this in mind, Michael Bernard-Donals and Richard Glejzer write that “living memory is not history; witnessing the event does not guarantee that its representations will not be inaccurate, or ineffective, or simply wrong. In fact, living memory is not so much the recuperation of events as it is an imprint of the loss of the event, and narrative histories, built as a bulwark against memory’s loss, stand in for and replace the event” (5). Bernard-Donals and Glejzer refer to Cathy Carruth, who has said that the event registers on the witness as a void and that rather than disclosing history, testimonial narratives disclose *the effect of events upon witnesses* (Bernard-Donals and Glejzer 5). Dori Laub has referred to this void

as the “collapse” or the “impossibility” of witnessing. Bernard-Donals and Glejzer comment that “it may be possible to produce knowledge from the Holocaust, but this is not to say that we produce knowledge *of* the Holocaust.” They continue to say that “what is transmitted is something other than knowledge, a radical sense of the event’s horror and unreason rather than a reasonable map of the event as history” (12-13). This “sense” is the location of the authenticity and value that Laub affirms. Bernard-Donals and Glejzer charge that much of the criticism leveled against Holocaust art is based on “an unnecessarily simplistic view of mimesis (that is, the truth can be told)” (13).

In addition to this, it is necessary to consider whether what a witness writes as testimony and what the reader of that testimony understands are identical. These readers (or hearers or viewers) become secondhand witnesses. That is, “traumatized by the images and testimonies of atrocity they encountered, [they] became witnesses to another trauma” (Bernard-Donals and Glejzer 14).

Bernard-Donals and Glejzer point out that “teaching as the dissemination of knowledge” has been characterized as “a retelling of things that the hearer already knows,” and that there are those who suggest that “seeing representation as a retelling or teaching of the Holocaust impoverishes not just the event but also the human capacity to think the event, because it forecloses the incommensurable in favor of a secure position from which to speak or be spoken.” They continue, “Humans have a tendency to elide incommensurabilities by inserting them into systems that have already been devised, into positions of identifying or naming (and therefore misrecognizing) trauma” (17).

There are other kinds of secure positions that must be considered. Terrence Des Pres—in his seminal essay “Holocaust *Laughter?*”—refers to them as fictions. He points out that all knowledge is grounded in “some system of practice and belief, some format of

permission and taboo . . . a ‘regime of truth’ from which discourse takes its bearing and legitimacy” (216). Des Pres insists that Holocaust writing is governed by the following fictions:

1. The Holocaust shall be represented, in its totality, as a unique event, as a special case and kingdom of its own, above or below or apart from history.

2. Representations of the Holocaust shall be as accurate and faithful as possible to the facts and conditions of the event, without change or manipulation for any reason—artistic reasons included.

3. The Holocaust shall be approached as a solemn or even sacred event, with a seriousness admitting no response that might obscure its enormity or dishonor its dead. (217)

He laments the fact that most of us accept these restrictions unquestioningly.

Des Pres refers to esteemed Holocaust historian Raul Hilberg, who is one of the many who enjoin us to bear witness through rigorous attention to *the facts*. Thus, in Des Pres’s view, Hilberg respects the second fiction and distrusts imagination and creativity in Holocaust representation. Des Pres also recalls Elie Wiesel’s statement that “a novel about Auschwitz is either not a novel or not about Auschwitz” (Des Pres 218).

Des Pres states that these fictions constitute a “Holocaust etiquette” that precludes certain responses to the event. In “Holocaust *Laughter?*” he is most concerned with the third fiction, which, he points out, seems perfectly reasonable when first stated. But then he

notes that since ancient times, it has been acknowledged that laughter has healing powers. He admits that, in reference to Holocaust laughter, “That something so slight should alleviate the burden of something so gigantic might, on the face of it, be a joke in itself” (218). He counters that with the suggestion that “our helplessness facing our knowledge of the Holocaust” is one of those situations in which “more decisive remedies fail.” He points to the Ringleblum Archives as proof that humor can be a survival strategy (218-19).

Des Pres goes on to analyze three works of Holocaust fiction: Tadeusz Borowski’s *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, Leslie Epstein’s *King of the Jews*, and Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*. (The latter two works will be addressed in detail in Chapters 4 and 5 of this dissertation.) All three of these works depict a world “grotesque and exaggerated by virtue of its comic perspective.” Des Pres recognizes that the historical Holocaust was, itself, such a world, but he writes that in these three works, “actuality is displaced by a fiction—by a *what if*—that is durable enough, and skillfully enough imposed, to inform the narrative with its own invented principle.” He acknowledges that such displacement is present in all fiction. But he states that in comedy it is more pronounced and that without the comic element, works would be “as grim as the world they refer to.” Des Pres then gets to the heart of his argument, writing that “It is largely for this reason, moreover, that realistic fiction so often fails. In its homage to fact, high seriousness is governed by a compulsion to reproduce, by the need to create a convincing likeness that never quite succeeds, never feels complete, just as earnestness feels inadequate to best intentions. Comic works, on the contrary, escape such liabilities; laughter is hostile to the world it depicts and subverts the respect on which representation depends” (219).

Des Pres distinguishes between tragedy, which accepts and affirms the actual world

through mimesis, and comedy, which mocks the actual world through anti-mimesis.

Tragedy accepts the gravity of what happens. Comedy, writes Des Pres, “deflates or even cancels the authority of its object.” Holocaust etiquette, with its insistence upon accuracy and fidelity to the facts and upon the maintenance of an appropriately solemn tone, seems to dictate that the Holocaust be represented exclusively in the tragic mode. If we do not follow this dictate, we are left with a sense of grave guilt. We accept the authority of the Holocaust over our lives so that we can feel that we are experiencing the pain of the event and bearing witness, even now (220).

Des Pres characterizes this attitude as noble, though perhaps debilitating. He suggests that at this point in time “a certain weariness” has settled over us. He writes that “a comic response to calamity is often more resilient, more effectively equal to terror and the sources of terror than a response that is solemn or tragic.” He continues, “The mimetic mode is proper to high seriousness because tragedy celebrates the mystery of what comes to pass. The antimimetic mode is proper to comedy because the comic spirit ridicules what comes to pass. Laughter revolts . . .” (220). He concludes by stating that the three works he has cited “enact this resistance; they refuse to take the Holocaust on its own crushing terms, even though all three depend for their foundation upon sharp memory of actual events. In each case, however, what survives is the integrity of an imagined world that is similar to, but deliberately different from, the actual world of the Holocaust. Our knowledge of history is not denied but displaced, and we discover the capacity to go forward with, so to speak, a foot in both worlds” (220-21).

A number of scholars and critics take Des Pres’s position one step further, arguing that reality in the twentieth century—largely because of the Holocaust—has become so absurd, so fantastic, that “not only is the fantastic appropriate for depicting the Holocaust, it

may indeed be, paradoxically, the most ‘natural’ mode in which to re-present this age of extremity” (Yogev 34). As Alvin H. Rosenfeld noted in *A Double Dying*, it took considerable willing suspension of disbelief to accept the central conceit of Franz Kafka’s story “The Metamorphosis,” in which a man is transformed into a bug, but it might take considerably more to accept the image in Elie Wiesel’s *Night* of small children being metamorphosed into smoke and ashes (24). Israeli Holocaust scholar Michael Yogev goes on to note that “the universe of the death camps is so imbued with hitherto unthinkable brutality and horror that it becomes literally fantastic”(34). He concludes that “it may take the combination of humor and fantasy to suggest in any way the true horror of the Holocaust for many nonvictim readers” (36).

In *Probing the Limits of Representation*, edited by Saul Friedlander, Geoffrey Hartman considers this possibility. Early in his essay “The Book of Destruction,” he notes that Friedlander had asked the contributors to his book to consider the limits of representation of an event “that is different in kind or degree from other catastrophic turns of history” (319). (Thus, he appears to accept Des Pres’s first “fiction” of Holocaust representation.) Yet he proceeds to depart from Holocaust etiquette, writing that he believes that there are no limits of representation—only limits of conceptualization. That is, we have the technical capacity to recreate the most extreme events, but not the mental capacity to understand them. Hartman states that every representation of the Holocaust that purports to be realistic eludes the question of *why* the event took place. He suggests that unrealistic representations might be preferable, asking, “Is it a certain type of mimesis that troubles us, so that a more abstract or mythical art might escape our discontent?” (321).

Hartman refers to Jean-Francois Lyotard’s comment that the techniques of

modern art “present the fact that the unrepresentable exists” (Hartman 321). Lyotard, however, views this situation as positive. He turns to Kant’s analytic of the sublime in order to explain this. Kant differentiated between the faculty that conceives and the faculty that presents; the sublime is located in the conflict between these two. Hartman writes that “sublime feelings arise when we conceive, for example, of the absolutely simple or the infinitely great, without being able to find an object or sense-perception to make them rationally communicable” (321). Lyotard has written that an aesthetic of the sublime “will enable us to see only by making it impossible to see; it will please only by causing pain” (qtd. in Hartman 321).

Lyotard applied his theories specifically to Holocaust representation. He sees the conflict characteristic of the Kantian sublime arising, here, not from a sense of greatness, but from a sense of terror. “It is when domination and terror become absolutes, that is, when they are *ideologized* and *totalized*, that we cannot discover in ourselves a possible scenario to explain what happened” (Hartman 322).

Hartman takes up the subject of Holocaust testimony and notes that it may be so “apocalyptic” that it dwarfs our prior knowledge of extreme experiences. It carries with it the aura of unreality. Even if we are capable of relating to it, we may resist doing so. It forces us to acknowledge our own potential for evil and the fragility of the civilization upon which we depend.

He writes that since the Holocaust was such a breach in reality and history—so unlike anything we had reason to expect—“the very rule of probability has suffered a shock, a rule that cannot be relinquished without giving up art’s crucial link to verisimilitude: to a mimetic and narratable dimension” (329). In Holocaust representation, “the material overwhelms art” (Hartman 331).

In concluding his essay, Hartman discusses Claude Lanzman's epic film *Shoah*. He comments, "It does not supply reality so much as it supplies art." He comments that *Shoah* depicts a state of victimhood that before the Holocaust had only been fantasized. He writes of *Shoah* that "the artistic purpose, which cannot for once be distinguished from the historical, is that reality has displaced fantasy; and this fact, at once terrible and incredible, means that myth and fiction may now have to be devalued to playthings, discarded in the light of their own grim fulfillment" (333).

Are there any lines that must not be crossed? Louis Kaplan writes that "all humor that matters moves its audience out of the comfort zone." He characterizes Holocaust humor as provocative and anarchic and argues that attempts to suppress it represent "discourses of closure and containment." Like carnival laughter, it operates outside of officialdom. Jewish Holocaust humor represents rebellion and survival—an antidote to what Kaplan calls "the cult of death at the center of Holocaust monumentality." Kaplan views humor as an alternative—and constructive—way to memorialize this tragic event (344).

Kaplan cites the transgressive performances of the Acco Theater Group in Israel. Acco is unapologetic about its unorthodox productions, such as *Arbeit Macht Frei*, which are regarded by many as blasphemous desecrations. The group and this particular work have been the subject of two films: the Israeli *Don't Touch My Holocaust* and the German *Balagan*. The word *balagan* means confusion and chaos in both Hebrew and Yiddish. *Balagan* makes use of the techniques of Antonin Artaud's Theater of Cruelty. Its performers "put the viewer in a problematic space where it is very difficult to determine whether one is bearing witness to farcical parody or horrific tragedy." One of

them, in particular, plays a number of roles—“objective observer, tyrannical authority, impassioned survivor, and insane anarchist.” She plays these roles in a variety of voices, which “destabilizes cultural viewpoints and linguistic codes.” The title *Arbeit Macht Frei* is used ironically; the play, and the film about the play, take the position that “only a theater of cruelty can work through the horrors of Auschwitz . . . on the path toward liberation” (Kaplan 353).

Working through the horrors of the Holocaust is arduous work, indeed. It requires strength, resolution, an empathic heart and an open mind. If we open our minds to humor, the strength and the resolution might be easier to summon; the unbearable might become at least a little easier to bear.

Chapter 2

Jewish Humor: Chasing the Ideal

Jews are known to answer questions with questions. In that spirit, the question “What is Jewish humor?” might be answered with the question “What is a Jew?” The answer depends on how one chooses to establish identity. One can choose among the criteria of religion, ancestry, ethnicity, and cultural ties, among others. An individual may meet some criteria and not others and still be considered a Jew. The definitive answer, if there is one, to the question of what, or who, is a Jew is beyond the scope of this paper. For present purposes, Jewish humor will be considered humor—jokes, anecdotes collected by folklorists, comic literature—created by Jews of any type reflecting aspects of Jewish life and Jewish sensibility (Berger 11).

Avner Ziv, who writes frequently on Jewish humor, has identified three psychological characteristics. The first is an intellectual dimension, which shows itself in a desire to distort reality and, thereby, render it less threatening. The second is a social dimension, which maintains identity and cohesiveness. The third is an emotional dimension, which helps the Jew to see himself as he is and enables him to mock himself (Berger 13-14).

There are recurrent themes that help us identify Jewish humor. It often has a religious aspect, dealing with God, rabbis, and Jewish religious practices. It was pointed out in Chapter 1 of this dissertation that humor is frequently based on the disparity between the real and the ideal. Much of the humor about God derives from the disparity between His perfection and the imperfection of the world He created. As Jewish comedian Woody Allen has remarked, “If it turns out there is a God, I don't think He is evil. I think

that the worst thing that you can say about Him is that He is an underachiever” (Telushkin 145).

The issues of Jewish identity and assimilation find their way into much Jewish humor. The above-mentioned “Jewish sensibility,” if there is one, derives largely from a history of enforced wandering and marginality. These experiences have brought about feelings of vulnerability and insecurity, to be sure. But they also have resulted in a strong concern for morality and social justice (Berger 24).

Jewish jokes about identity and assimilation are based on the feeling that a Jew is a Jew—that he can never truly assimilate. This feeling is found in the following story:

American banker Otto Kahn was Jewish by birth but had converted to Christianity. He was once walking with a hunchbacked friend when they passed a synagogue.

“You know I used to be a Jew,” Kahn said.

“And I used to be a hunchback,” his companion replied. (Telushkin 125)

The Jewish family is a frequent target—particularly the Jewish mother (though, interestingly, not the Jewish father). It is the intense interconnectedness of Jewish family members that invites affectionate, if exasperated, laughter. From its beginnings, Judaism has placed a strong emphasis on family cohesiveness. Yet it has been suggested that the pogroms and other kinds of persecution the Jews have suffered have instilled a deep-rooted fear for the next generation’s very survival, resulting in unusual over-protectiveness (Telushkin 32).

Such events also strengthened an already-existing aversion to violence. Combativeness and aggression are generally expressed verbally, and disputes are settled

in the same manner:

The battle of Tannenberg was at its height when a czarist officer drew up his company and addressed them. “The moment has come! We are going to charge the enemy. It’ll be man against man in hand combat.” In the company was a Jewish soldier who was not fond of the czar or his war. “Please, sire, show me my man!” he cried. “Perhaps I can come to an understanding with him?” (Berger 95)

Furthermore, the blind obedience sometimes required in combat situations is incompatible with the Jewish tradition of thinking a problem through.

Militarism is inspired largely by patriotism—love of country. Because, prior to the founding of the state of Israel in 1948, the Jews had been a people without a country, patriotism, as such, would have been foreign to them, and the idea that it might be an honor to die for one’s country would have made no sense. Yet Jews throughout history, when they identified a worthy cause, fought and sacrificed for it just as anyone else. It was the worthiness of the heroic ideal that eluded them (Reik 60-61). Noted scholar Ruth Wisse wrote a book entitled *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero*. Clearly, the schlemiel (to be discussed later) is not a hero in the traditional mold. Yet he is not quite what we think of as an anti-hero, either. As Wisse explains, he challenges the very idea of heroism. He makes us consider whether heroism, as it traditionally has been portrayed, is even an ideal worthy of pursuing. Wisse suggests that the schlemiel’s renunciation of heroism makes him strong (39).

Other themes that recur in the jokes that Jews tell about themselves include a preoccupation with money, rampant materialism, and questionable business ethics. All of this begs the question: How do Jews regard themselves? If we assume the debatable

position that a people can have a collective psyche, we can imagine a Jewish psyche and attempt to examine it. The self-loathing Jew has become a cliché of modern times. Freud, arguably, contributed to the construction of that cliché in his writings on Jewish humor, which he characterized as self-critical. A much-quoted, variously interpreted remark of his was “I do not know whether there are many other instances of a people making fun to such a degree of its own character” (Freud 133). But is this self-criticism really indicative of self-hatred and a masochistic desire for punishment? Freud set the stage for an enduring debate.

One of his own disciples, Theodor Reik, in his book *Jewish Wit*, went so far as to identify “an intensive self-humiliating and self-degrading tendency” in Jewish humor (226). Yet Reik’s analysis is more subtle and nuanced than this judgment would suggest. He cites Dr. Edmund Bergler as the first to recognize a tendency toward “psychic masochism” in Jewish humor. Bergler attributed this masochism to external circumstances, such as isolation and poverty. Reik, a psychoanalyst, naturally sought explanations in the repressed and unconscious. Reik next cites another psychoanalyst, Martin Grotjahn, who wrote that all jokes are, essentially, tendentious—that they are disguised expressions of aggressive impulses. The Jew, victim of ceaseless provocation and persecution, turns the dangerous impulses aroused by his persecutors inward, toward himself, in the manner of the masochist. Grotjahn called this “victory through defeat,” and Reik elaborates, “It is as if the joke says, ‘You do not need to attack us. We can do that ourselves and even better. We can take it, we know our weaknesses, and in a way are proud of it [sic]’”(Reik 220).

Yet he proceeds to question whether Jewish jokes are truly masochistic in the clinical sense. He notes that these jokes provide no instinctual gratification; they produce in their targets misery rather than delight. Reik suggests that the Jew sees the self-

degradation in these jokes as a defense against greater threats. Survival, after all, is and always has been the Jew's chief concern. As Reik writes, “if they do not sink they will not rise” (222).

He then reminds us that although some Jewish jokes undeniably are characterized by self-criticism, numerous others reflect just the opposite tendency—toward self-aggrandizement. He notes the relationship between masochism and paranoia. The masochist harbors feelings of worthlessness and dependency. He punishes himself and provokes pity or contempt from others, while, at the same time, attempting to ingratiate himself with them. The paranoid character is the mirror image of this. Paranoia derives from exaggerated feelings of self-importance. The paranoid character is convinced that this importance attracts constant surveillance. He reacts with considerable hostility toward his perceived persecutors and almost everyone else, viewing them as his inferiors. He forestalls the hostility he anticipates from them by attacking first (Reik 227). Reik cites an additional psychoanalyst, Jules Nydes, who compared masochism and paranoia in terms of their relation to love and power. Nydes judged that while the masochist may sacrifice power in order to win love, the paranoid character may sacrifice love in order to feel powerful.

Jewish jokes, writes Reik, “oscillate between an ingratiating and a provocative attitude and . . . move back and forth between a masochistic and a paranoid behavior pattern. The paranoid attitude is certainly, in most cases, latent or hidden. Yet it reveals itself not only in the claim implied in many jokes that the Jews are the favorites of God, but also in their unconscious sense of superiority” (228). Reik notes a further connection between masochism and paranoia in Jewish humor in the idea that God punishes those He loves.

Others, outside the psychoanalytic community, look to exterior circumstances to explain the prevalence of self-mockery in Jewish humor. David Ben-Amos is one of the many who focus on socio-economic conditions. He cites a number of studies that, paradoxically, attribute the self-ridicule in Jewish humor not to the harsh circumstances the Jews have had to endure, but rather, to their emancipation from these circumstances. According to this line of thought, the ambivalent identity brought about by assimilation compelled Jews to regard themselves with a kind of critical mirth.

Then there are those who locate the beginnings of Jewish self-deprecating humor among “transitional Jews”—those who had “emerged from the ghetto but [had] not shed its culture” (Ben-Amos 118). Some of these transitional Jews mocked their more traditional counterparts in order to gain admittance into the dominant culture. It also has been suggested that in Western Europe and the United States, “the cause of self-hatred in Jewish humor is not the process of transition but ‘the psychological ambiguity of life in a marginal social position’”(Ben-Amos 119).

Ben-Amos insists that Jewish society is “a complex, heterogeneous social environment,” and he warns against viewing it as a “holistic entity” with a monolithic voice (121). He concludes that subgroups within this society rarely make fun of themselves (i.e., rabbis don't tell jokes about rabbis and Jewish mothers don't ridicule Jewish mothers). Rather, they tell jokes that mock other subgroups. This deflates the idea of a masochistic humor and points, instead, to inter-group tensions within the Jewish community.

Writing much later, Christie Davies is similarly dubious of the claim that Jewish jokes reflect self-hatred. He asks us to pay close attention to the “tone” of the jokes, writing that “Jewish jokes *play* with hostility and stereotypes; *they do not endorse them*” (190). Davies regards Jewish humor as a subgroup of a more general category: minority humor,

and he points to the “asymmetry” between majority and minority humor. Majority humor tends to take aim at minorities; minority humor may target majorities, but it is also frequently self-directed. He cites Avner Ziv, who noted that in Israel, where Jews are the majority, both Jews and Arabs prefer jokes that mock Arabs to those that mock Jews (Ziv, *Personality* 159).

Davies points out that majority humor is the kind that can be explained by the Superiority Theory (discussed in Chapter 1 of this dissertation). Yet he takes exception to the argument that such jokes are necessarily a form of aggression. There may be no evidence of hostility between the tellers and the targets of these stories. Further, there are countless instances of conflict that have produced no humor whatsoever. He goes on to focus on the behavior of members of minority groups while they are telling jokes about themselves, and upon the behavior of their audiences, as well. He writes that if these people were truly “reveling in self-hatred,” they would be creating an atmosphere of tension and hostility rather than the usually observed one of relaxation and camaraderie.

Davies goes so far as to say that self-deprecating jokes may be “assertions of autonomy and vitality” (193). He quotes another humor theorist who suggests that such jokes declare “This is the way we are, the way we always have been, and the way we always will be!” (Mendel 173). Davies gives no credence, either, to the idea that Jewish jokes that are self-admiring are indicative of latent paranoia. He cites the remarkable ascendance of Jews in the Western world—from poverty and powerlessness to success and full participation in society—and suggests that they express their pride indirectly, in their jokes, in order to avoid provoking hostility.

A Jewish joke that Jews exchange among themselves will sound very different when delivered by an anti-Semite. As Davies states, “Tendentiousness is not a quality of a joke

as such but is a quality of the teller” (202). Context is all, and Davies rejects outright the claims of Reik and Grotjahn that self-deprecating jokes are necessarily reflections of self-hatred. When such jokes are told by Jews, to Jews, they may be “a way of coping with a difficult situation by an overt, controlled, and temporary fantasy that combines imagination with reality to produce a laughter of endurance for those within the group” (Davies 202).

In fact, Jewish humor—during the Holocaust as well as before and after —has been widely recognized as a source of salvation. It has been “a balance to counter external adversity and internal sadness”(Cohen 4). Sarah Blacher Cohen stresses the important point that there is no glorification of suffering in Judaism. As Robert Alter wrote, “Jewish humor typically drains the charge of cosmic significance from suffering by grounding it in a world of . . . practical realities” (Cohen 26). The practical realities of Jewish history—crusades, expulsions and pogroms, culminating in the Holocaust—provided the Jews with countless opportunities to seek solace.

Psychoanalyst Kurt Schlesinger notes that responses to such events may be made in either the tragic or the comic mode. In the tragic mode powerlessness is denied; the struggle, itself, is viewed as meaningful, no matter what the outcome. In the comic mode powerlessness is denied, writes Schlesinger, “by treating the definition of power/powerlessness as fluid and indeterminate. It shrugs off a rigid determinism and in its place posits a protean, fluid world in which meaning is subjective and ambiguous, incongruent” (322). He illustrates this with the following joke, commonly found in collections of Jewish humor:

An Englishman, a Frenchman, an American,
and a Jew are in the midst of philosophic discussion.

The problem is posed how each would act when it

became unmistakably clear that they had only a few hours to live. They hypothesize the situation in which a flood inundates the land, there are no means of escape, and they are awaiting the inevitable end. The Englishman speaks first, “I would open my best bottle of port. Sit and enjoy every sip. Think of the life I’ve lived, the experiences I’ve had and let the waters come and take me.”

The Frenchman says, “I would drink a great Bordeaux, prepare a *coq au vin*, make love and let the waters overwhelm me thus.”

The American is next: He would eat, drink, make love, try to improvise a raft and finally swim until his strength gave out, and he drowned, “fighting to the end.”

The Jew says: “I would do all you have described, and when the water got over my head, I guess I would have to learn *how to live underwater*.” (322)

The Englishman, the Frenchman, and the American respond in the tragic mode—ready to fight, suffer, and die in the way that tragic heroes do. The Jew fights and suffers, as well, but he refuses to acquiesce to death. He alters his stance toward the rules of reality. He rejects the idea of dying as an ennobling ending and feels free to create a more desirable—though totally unrealistic—one. The Jews often have had to challenge reality and create their own world, through their jokes and humorous stories, in order to keep going and survive. The ghettos and camps

constituted such a reality, in which, as Schlesinger writes, people learned to live underwater (322).

Alter points out that although, in Jewish humor, suffering is imagined as inevitable, “it is also conceived as incongruous with dignity”; the sufferer is construed as being, to some extent, ridiculous. This is apparent in such stock characters of Jewish folklore and fiction as the schlemiel and the schlimazel. The schlemiel is typically clumsy, inept, and unlucky. The schlimazel is a more passive character who may suffer from the schlemiel’s clumsiness. (Another stock character, the nebbish, assumes the role of cleaning up the schlemiel’s messes. Thus, as Asa Arthur Berger writes [93], a schlemiel may spill his soup on a schlimazel, and a nebbish invariably cleans it up.) To be sure, these characters overlap; yet Ruth Wisse, who arguably wrote definitively on the schlemiel, provides a distinction. She calls the schlemiel “the active disseminator of bad luck.” The schlimazel, on the other hand, has a penchant for stumbling upon it. “Whereas comedy involving the schlimazel tends to be situational,” she writes, “the schlemiel’s comedy is existential, deriving from his very nature in its confrontation with reality” (14).

Wisse acknowledges the Jewish capacity for absorbing pain while remaining hopeful; yet she also acknowledges that the pain inevitably takes its toll. She writes that “the techniques of self-containment and self-control produced some self-disgust as well, and a great deal of bitterness” and that the life-style of the schlemiel “is the sum of these techniques” (x). To Wisse the schlemiel’s “most outstanding folly” is his weakness, which symbolizes the position of the Jew in Eastern European society. Wisse writes that the humor of the schlemiel is intended to persuade us that his weakness is a kind of strength, and she notes that the Jews, in order to survive, have employed the same “sleight of hand.” Once again they challenge reality, this time by refusing to be defined by their oppressors.

Since the Jews' attitude toward their own fragility was, as Wisse writes, "complex and contradictory," it is not surprising to find that their attitude toward the schlemiel figure was ambivalent, as well. At the same time as they ridiculed him, they "used the schlemiel as the model of endurance, his innocence a shield against corruption, his absolute defenselessness the only guaranteed defense against the brutalizing potential of might" (Wisse 5).

Wisse specifically emphasizes that Jews, who created the schlemiel, are not afflicted with self-hatred. They are proud of having survived; they are confident that they are not as impotent as they might seem to the outside world; and they are defiant toward those who would judge them. It will come as no surprise, on the other hand, that Theodor Reik characterizes the schlemiel as "a masochistic character who has the strong unconscious will to fail and to spoil his chances" (Reik 41).

If Jews' attitude toward their weakness is complex, their attitude toward one of their greatest strengths is no less so. The Jewish intellectual tradition, justifiably a source of pride, provokes good-natured criticism, as well. Reik refers to jokes that "acknowledge and simultaneously ridicule the belief in the power of thinking" (46). He offers the following story, translated from the Yiddish, of a rabbi trying to locate his lost glasses:

Since the glasses are not here, they have either run away or someone has taken them. Ridiculous, how could they have run away? They don't have any legs. Since someone must have stolen them, it must be someone who has glasses or someone who has not. If it was a person who already has glasses, he will not take mine. If it was someone who does not have glasses, he was someone who does not see without them. If he has no glasses and

sees, what does he need my glasses for? It must have been someone who has no glasses and sees nothing. If he is someone who has no glasses and does not see, how could he then find mine? Since no one took them who has glasses and sees and no one took them who has no glasses and sees nothing, and since they did not run away because they have no legs, the glasses must be here. But I see they are not here. I do see? Thus I have glasses. Since I have glasses, they must be either mine or those of another person! But how come another person's glasses are on my nose? Since they cannot be other glasses, they must be mine. Here they are! (115)

As Reik points out, it is hardly the triumph of logic that makes us laugh here; rather, it is the “exaggerated intellectual expenditure” that is wasted in order to arrive at an obvious conclusion. The rabbi applies the kind of deductive reasoning he has been trained to use in his Talmudic studies.

The Talmud has been linked to another characteristic of Jewish thought and humor, as well: the propensity for answering a question with a question. “Why?” is likely to be answered with “Why not?” Steve Lipman attributes this tendency, at least in part, to the give-and-take nature of Talmudic argument. He notes, as well, that in the Aramaic text, there is no punctuation. Thus, declarative sentences are not readily discernible from interrogative ones.

Lipman proceeds to offer deeper explanations. He notes that Jews—so often having occupied a tenuous place in society—feel safer offering answers that are evasive; this, the reasoning goes, leaves them less vulnerable to attack. He observes, further, that during the Nazi era, when logic was turned on its head, the inclination for questioning was especially

understandable. He offers a commonly circulated joke of the time:

During the onset of the Nazi terror, an elderly Jew was walking down the street in Berlin when he was stopped by two stormtroopers.

“Halt, Jew!” they cried, and proceeded to interrogate him.

“Who is responsible for all of Germany’s troubles?” they demanded.

The Jew looked at them and said, “Why, the bicycle riders and the Jews.”

“Bicycle riders?” they shouted. “What foolishness. Why the bicycle riders?”

“Why the Jews?” replied the old man.

Lipman writes that for some questions, there are no answers, and that “for a generation whose faith was shaken, for whom there were no absolutes—where was God, where was man?—the most sensible answer was often a question” (206).

Even more poignant:

A Jew survives the gas chambers, having lost every one of his relatives.

The resettlement officer asks him where he would like to go.

“Australia,” he replies.

“But that’s so far,” says the officer.

“From where?” asks the Jew. (Lipman 208)

For the Jewish survivors Europe was no longer a point of reference. They had lost their bearings and their whole world, as well.

The above joke, or some version of it, has appeared in anthologies of Jewish humor since the 1940s. One version was told on the radio in the spring of 1939 by writer and journalist Alexander Woollcott during a broadcast in support of the Wagner-Rogers Bill. The bill would have relaxed immigration restrictions and allowed some 20,000 children, mostly Jewish, to escape from Nazi Germany and enter the United States. It was ultimately withdrawn after fierce opposition from various patriotic organizations, sealing the children's doom (Raskin 144).

The joke can be understood in two different ways. Alan Dershowitz connects it to the concept of the wandering Jew, emphasizing its timelessness and contextualizing it within Jewish folklore. He clearly situates its meaning within the Jews' persistent historical condition rather than within circumstances outside of it. However, the joke also can be placed in the specific historical and political context of the post-war era (Raskin 145-46).

Even when Jewish jokes and humorous stories do not turn on questions answered by questions, they often take the form of "internal dialectic dialogues" featuring if-then reasoning—point and counterpoint (Saper 81-82). Hasidic stories often feature "a comic wrestling with God's laws" in which the lesson learned is found more in the give-and-take between teacher and pupil than in the frequently enigmatic answers (Saposnik 101). The *chochem fun Chelm* stories often feature such dialogues, as well.

Chelm was an actual city in Poland. Rabbi Joseph Telushkin writes that its citizens "were for unknown reasons stigmatized as idiots" (58). Jokes about Chelm started circulating in the manner of folklore in the nineteenth century. In these stories we once again find the Jewish reverence for scholarship and scholars being poked fun at. When

confronted with a problem, the citizens of Chelm typically will arrive at a solution that is “theoretically correct, but practically absurd” (Wisse 10). Ruth Wisse offers this example:

Once, during the period of penitential prayers, the old shammes (sexton) of Chelm complained that he was too old and too weak to make the rounds of all the Jewish homes, banging on the shutters to wake the inhabitants for midnight services. The people of Chelm called an assembly, considered the problem from all points of view, and concluded that it would be best to assemble all the shutters, stack them by the shammes’ house, and have him bang on all of them at the same time. (10)

Such stories mock intellectualism divorced from reality. Wisse notes that the Hasidic movement revolted against Talmudic scholasticism in much the same way.

In other jokes and stories, difficult situations are reinterpreted so as to eliminate the fear and pain:

Once a fire broke out in the house where Motke Khabad was living. As the house went up in flames, the inhabitants all rushed outside in a frenzy. Some brought pails of water, but Motke stood there laughing. “What are you laughing at?” they asked him. Motke replied: “I see my revenge on the cockroaches.” (Wisse 12)

Wisse harks back to Freud to explain how stories such as these work: humorous

displacement allows an inappropriate response to transform a horrific moment into a pleasure-giving one.

Rabbi Joseph Telushkin comments that the inhabitants of Chelm, rather than being stupid, are in possession of “a naivete so extraordinary that the listeners are catapulted to a new vision of reality” (58). He also writes that although they may hear the same words as we hear, they understand them differently. He illustrates this with the following joke:

A Jew from Chelm visits Warsaw. In the main shul (synagogue), he hears the shammes ask a riddle: “Who is my father's son but not my brother?”

No one knows.

“It’s me,” the shammes says.

The Chelm Jew is very impressed. He returns home and, after shul, asks: “Who is my father’s son but not my brother?”

No one knows. So the Chelm Jew answers: “The shammes in Warsaw.” (59)

The Chelm stories gently mock those who passively accept their lot in life while they wait for heavenly intervention. One story suggests, “If waiting for the Messiah is a low-paying task, it is nonetheless steady work” (Saposnik 101).

In schlemiel jokes and stories, the anti-intellectualism of the Cheim stories merges with antirationalism. As Wisse writes, “The reader is invited to entertain the paradoxical notion that the absurd interpretation of experience may permit optimism, whereas a rational explanation will never lead beyond despair” (12-13). The historical facts of the nineteenth

and twentieth centuries certainly pointed toward despair for the Jews. Thus, it is not surprising that they were inspired and consoled by figures who embodied moral strength. The schlemiel, for all his political weakness, was such a figure.

Isaac Bashevis Singer created a memorable schlemiel in his story “Gimpel the Fool.” Singer wrote the story in Yiddish; it was translated into English by Saul Bellow in 1953. It is noteworthy that even after the Holocaust—after the annihilation of 6 million Jews, the extinction of entire communities, the virtual death of a language and a culture—this story of moral victory could still resonate with readers throughout Europe and America. The symptom of Gimpel’s foolishness is his trust. He is continuously deceived by his fellow-villagers in the fictional town of Frampol, yet he never loses his faith in the triumph of goodness. Wisse points out that he is tested more harshly than the typical schlemiel of previous stories—a possible reflection of the grimness of the historical period in which he was created.

This story is distinguished by Gimpel’s attitude toward himself. He states explicitly at the introduction to the story, “I don’t think myself a fool. On the contrary. But that’s what folks call me” (3). The Frampol rabbi supports Gimpel, advising him, “It is written, better to be a fool all your days than for one hour to be evil. You are not a fool. They are the fools. For he who causes his neighbor to feel shame loses Paradise himself” (5). Wisse suggests that Gimpel “may be choosing to play the fool in order to retain his moral sanity in the face of universal cynicism” (61).

Gimpel makes a deliberate choice to believe his wife’s excuses for her multiple infidelities. “What’s the good of *not* believing?” he asks himself philosophically. “Today it’s your wife you don’t believe; tomorrow it’s God Himself you won’t take stock in”(14). Wisse makes the important connection between Gimpel’s attitude toward his wife

and his attitude toward God. He chooses to trust both unconditionally though circumstances have given him no reason to. Wisse also points out the story's somewhat ambiguous attitude toward Gimpel, who is sometimes portrayed as faithful, sometimes as gullible.

Referring to the Holocaust, Wisse suggests that “man’s heretofore unsuspected genius for evil” may have rendered the schlemiel obsolete. In our time, political activism seems a far more appropriate response to the world’s evils. Yet for most victims of the Holocaust, a political response was not an option. Keeping faith and continuing to behave in a moral, ethical manner were the only forms of resistance available. Even in our time, there is pain that politics cannot possibly address. For that pain we might look to the schlemiel—the fool, the madman, or the saint—for guidance.

It has been suggested that black humor has roots in the shtetl tradition of the schlemiel and the schlimazel. Both feature fools as protagonists. In Jay Boyer’s view, traditional protagonists have had a choice between accommodation at one end of the continuum and rebellion at the other. For the black humor hero, neither choice exists any longer. Frequently, the comedy lies in his inability to recognize this. He is condemned to live his life without agency. The schlemiel never had the choice of rebelling; he was born lacking the resources to change or become more than he is. He understands the world through simplistic beliefs; logic and learning are beyond him. He interprets events according to his already-existing beliefs. He rarely acts for himself; he generally reacts to events as they occur. In fiction, he changes little from the beginning of a story to its end. In society, he is an outsider. When we consider the nature of the society he stands outside of, he appears to us to be a hero (Boyer 167-69). The outsider is often an honored figure in modern fiction—especially modern American fiction. But this is not true of the victim, the loser. The black humor protagonist is both.

Traditional heroes have had to choose whether to create their own system of values and live true to it or to accommodate themselves to the existing values of the culture in which they live. But they had to choose. The black humor hero, with no reward in sight, has no motivation to choose. The schlemiel points us to something beyond everyday culture and values. The black humor hero points us only to the void (Boyer 173-74).

There are stock characters beside the schlemiel and the schlimazel to be found in Jewish jokes and stories. Two that appear frequently are the schadchen (marriage broker) and the schnorrer (beggar). Freud addressed each in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. He notes the schadchen's "characteristic mixture of mendacious impudence and readiness of repartee" (63), which he illustrates with the following joke:

The schadchen was defending the girl
he had proposed against the young man's protests.

"I don't care for the mother-in-law," said
the latter. "She's a disagreeable, stupid person."

"But after all, you're not marrying the
mother-in-law. What you want is her daughter."

"Yes, but she's not young any longer, and
she's not precisely a beauty."

"No matter. If she's neither young nor
beautiful she'll be all the more faithful to you."

"And she hasn't much money."

"Who's talking about money? Are you

marrying money, then? After all it's a wife that
you want."

"But she's got a hunchback too."

"Well, what *do* you want? Isn't she to
have a single fault?" (71)

Freud points to the glib argument intended to mask faulty reasoning—a tactic commonly employed in Jewish humor.

Schadchens were more than characters in jokes and stories; such people actually existed. Excluded from many occupations, shtetl Jews had to find ways to get by. One such way was by arranging marriages, thus serving an important function in their communities. The schadchen was also valued for his or her propensity for carrying gossip from home to home. The schadchen, as well as the schnorrer, to be discussed below, were viewed ambivalently by their neighbors. On the one hand, they were the exasperating targets of jokes. But on the other hand, they were viewed with a kind of affectionate tolerance and appreciated for the role they played. Furthermore, they were recognized unquestioningly as members of the closed shtetl society. As such, they added to the cohesiveness of the group. They were the targets of jokes, but not of the bitterest jokes. That role was reserved for those in the hostile world outside of the shtetl (Ziv, *Jewish Humor* 51). Some have suggested that there is a subconscious hostility toward women present in schadchen jokes, in which the prospective bride is invariably hideously deformed, disabled, or otherwise undesirable. As Asa Arthur Berger noted, "I can't recall any jokes about beautiful women being taken by schadchens to meet ugly and deformed men" (104). Still, he also noted that the woman's afflictions are generally so outsized as to be obviously exaggerated, emphasizing the unreality of the

story. In a more serious vein, Berger sees the schadchen as symbolic of the Jews in general—making the best of the less-than-promising circumstances they face. Both schadchens and Jews, he suggests, may resist recognizing the dimensions of the problems confronting them; rather, they try to retain their optimism.

In order to understand the figure of the schnorrer, one must understand the place of charity among Jews. Telushkin offers the following:

At a circus, the strongman Hercules startles everyone with magnificent feats of strength, lifting hundreds of pounds over his head and putting a fist through a solid wall. For his final act, he takes a lemon and squeezes it. At first, the juice dribbles out quickly, then it slows down, and finally not a single drop comes out. The circus manager steps forward and says: “I will personally give anyone who can squeeze even one more drop from this lemon two hundred dollars.” Two large men, both of whom look like bouncers, step forward. Each one squeezes the lemon with all his might, but not a drop comes out.

“Does anyone else want to try?” the manager asks.

A short, slightly built man steps forward. People in the crowd snicker. The man picks up the lemon and squeezes it. Juice gushes out. The

manager is stunned. He steps forward with two hundred-dollar bills, but when he hands them over, he can't resist asking the man: "Who are you? What do you do?"

"Seymour Goldstein," the man answers. "I'm a fund-raiser for the UJA [United Jewish Appeal]." (167)

People tend to be reluctant to part with money, and Jewish charities are renowned for their prowess at squeezing the last bit of juice out of a lemon—if not a stone.

The Hebrew word for charity, *tzedaka*, is derived from *tzedek*, the word for justice. The Talmud teaches, "*Tzedaka* is equal to all other commandments combined" (Telushkin 168). This goes a long way toward explaining the schnorrer's self-confidence. Avner Ziv, in fact, writes that schnorrers "elevated chutzpa to a state of art" (*Jewish Humor* 51). They often felt that they were doing a favor for those they extracted money from. If they didn't really feel that way, they acted as if they did.

Of course, the harsh conditions under which the Jews of the shtetls lived contributed toward the presence of schnorrers, as well. The schnorrer, like everyone else, had to survive. He used any means he could devise to achieve his desired end. "Tact and self-restraint were not his strong points" (Ausubel 267; qtd. in Berger 105), as evidenced in the following schnorrer joke:

A schnorrer appeared at the home of a rich man and begged for some money to see a doctor. The rich man gave him some money. "But I need more than this if I'm to go to the clinic." "But that's very expensive," said the rich man. "Why

don't you go to a regular doctor?" "For my health," said the schnorrer, "nothing is too good." (Berger 107)

The idea that only the best is good enough for someone who has nothing is common in schnorrer jokes. As Berger states, "There is something almost heroic about the audacity of the schnorrer" (105).

Jewish folklore contributed to what eventually became Jewish comic literature. Two revolutionary movements of the mid-eighteenth century helped to lay the groundwork, as well. One was Hasidism, which encouraged joy as the proper mood for religious life. Hasidism rejected what it viewed as the rigidity of traditional Judaism as practiced and prescribed by the religious leadership. The second was the *Haskalah*, or Jewish Enlightenment, which found both traditional Judaism and Hasidism unacceptable. The *Haskalah* brought forth a considerable body of satirical writing in both Hebrew and Yiddish (Goldsmith 13-14).

The *Haskalah* originated as a German-Jewish movement. Its major proponent was Moses Mendelssohn, who had been influenced by the rationalism of the time. Later, romanticism exerted its influence. Eventually, the traditional theological rationale for Jewish life was weakened and replaced with historical and cultural approaches (Goldsmith 14).

Meanwhile, in mid-nineteenth-century Russia, intellectuals were turning to populism, looking to the folk for authenticity. This influenced Jewish intellectuals, as well. In all, it can be said that "the emergence of modern Jewish humor is . . . coincident with the proliferation of ideological diversity in Eastern European Jewish society and with the triumph of the Yiddish language as a major written as well as oral medium of Jewish culture" (Goldsmith 14).

The three masters of Jewish comic literature were Mendele Mocher Sforim, Sholom Aleichem, and Y. L. Peretz. They wrote as Eastern European Jews were emerging from a relatively primitive, segregated society into mainstream Western culture. While eager to lead their people into modernity, these three *maskilim* (idealistic intellectuals) were just as committed to preserving Jewish identity. As they made their way into a new world, many Jews were burdened with feelings of inferiority stemming from their unfamiliarity with new languages and cultures and, as well, from their historical treatment as a debased people. Sholom Aleichem, Mendele, and Peretz reminded them of their own great culture—their humanism and their ethical standards—and urged them to go forth with pride (Goldsmith 19).

Mendele's instrument was satire. Discarding sentimentality, he portrayed shtetl life as provincial and beset by superstition. Like all satire, his work assumed the existence of a moral and ethical standard. His standard was a combination of traditional Jewish ethics and the principles of the Haskalah. The objects of his satire were those who violated those codes.

The devastating poverty of the shtetl Jews forced Mendele to view them more sympathetically and focus his satire on their oppressors. They needed food more than enlightenment. Furthermore, he recognized that social reform was not up to them; it was up to the local and Czarist governments. Gradually, he abandoned social satire for social allegory, “the novel of ideas, and . . . irony—a kind of satire in which the model is God, the unrealizable ideal of perfection, and in which the hopelessness of the existing conditions is pitted against the Messianic dream. Once the gap between reality and improvement is unbridgeable, the ideal to which the mind turns might as well be transcendental” (Wisse 29). The evolution of Mendele's philosophy can be seen in a single book—*The Travels of*

Benjamin III.

Peretz, called “the intellectual force of Yiddish literature” (Saposnik 101), took a cosmic view, much like Mendele in his later work. Well-versed in Hasidic lore, Peretz combines the logical with the theological. In perhaps his most famous story, “Bontshe Shvayg,” he looks skeptically upon the idea of obedience as a virtue. Ruth Wisse has commented that the story is commonly misread as a study of sainthood, whereas it is actually “a socialist’s exposure of the grotesquerie of suffering in silence” (22). His comedy could be caustic and bitter (Saposnik 102).

Surely the most famous of the masters of Yiddish comic writing is Sholom Aleichem. He is less satirical than Mendele and less caustic than Peretz, able to write critically and affectionately at the same time. He was greatly influenced by Mendele, from whom he learned how to use jokes, parody, and word-play (Goldsmith 22). Sholom Aleichem exposes the weaknesses of shtetl society without robbing it of its dignity. Both are embodied in the character of Tevye the Dairyman, the hero of eight stories. Tevye’s life reflects the evolving predicament of the shtetl Jew. Over time, Tevye faces various challenges from each of his five daughters. He is forced to reexamine his values and adjust them—to the extent that he is able—to a world that threatens to erase his identity as well as his very existence (Saposnik 102).

Despite the fragile position of Sholom Aleichem’s Jews, his has been characterized as a literature of optimism. It has been pointed out that his work must be viewed within the context of Judaism, which posits the existence of a just God and makes ethical behavior a requirement for a meaningful life. In doing so, it created a context of optimism and hope. Even during the Holocaust, Sholom Aleichem’s stories brought comfort to the inmates of the ghettos and camps (Goldsmith 13-16). While optimistic,

Sholom Aleichem's humor is a response to the disparity between the real and the ideal—between what is and what ought to be.

Sholom Aleichem's three major works are *Tevye the Dairyman*, *Menahem-Mendl*, and *Motl, Son of Peysi the Cantor*. The hero of each work may be thought of as an archetype—each, in his own way, representing the Jewish people as a whole as Sholom Aleichem viewed them. *Tevye the Dairyman* is a sequence of stories in the tradition of medieval Yiddish folktales and Hasidic legends, in which a righteous man rises above his predicament and sees his faith, ultimately, vindicated. *Menahem-Mendl* may be seen as a parody of the *brivnshtellers*—Yiddish letter-writing guides popular in Sholom Aleichem's time despite their stilted vocabularies and rigid structures. Its hero symbolizes the Jew who has been driven to succumb to modern life and, as a consequence, becomes separated from his roots and traditions. *Motl, Son of Peysi the Cantor*, is a portrait of East European Jewish childhood and a celebration of those who made the difficult transition to America with their traditions upheld and their spirits intact (Goldsmith 16-17).

The shteti in which Sholom Aleichem's characters lived and from which they were ultimately driven was Kasrilevka—from the Hebrew name Kasriel, which means “crown of God.” One can trace a direct line from the fools' town of Chelm to Mendele's Kabtzansk (Paupersville) to Kasrilevka. The Chelm tales are witty; the Kabtzansk stories are satirical; the Kasrilevka stories are characterized by adventure, pathos, and humor (Goldsmith 23). Word-play and illogic link the Chelm stories to Sholom Aleichem's, as well. As Emanuel S. Goldsmith has observed, Sholom Aleichem's characters “often sacrifice the rules of sound reasoning to considerations of humanity and kindness. They even find it impossible to conceive of their persecutors as impervious to the cause of justice and the cry of the oppressed. Sholom Aleichem's ‘little people’ take things for granted.

They count their chickens before they are hatched. They commit regularly every fallacy of logic. Rules do not appeal to them because they are creatures of the heart” (20).

A perfect example of this kind of “little person” is Sholem Shacnach, the hero of one of Sholom Aleichem’s masterpieces: “On Account of a Hat.” In the story, Sholem Shacnach has just completed the first successful business deal of his life and is now headed home to celebrate Passover with his family. He wires his wife, promising his timely arrival—forgetting that the way home is complicated and the trains are unreliable. Awaiting his connection, he falls asleep on a bench next to a Russian official. He awakens and realizes that his hat is missing. Since all observant Jewish men are required to keep their heads covered, he absentmindedly grabs the official’s hat. To his amazement, as he rushes to catch his train he is treated with deference by the crowds and by the conductors, who seat him in a first-class car. He takes his seat, stunned, and tries to figure out what has occurred. Suddenly, he sees himself in a mirror with the official’s hat on his head. He concludes that he cannot, after all, be Sholem Shacnach, since the hat identifies him as someone else. He leaps from the train, misses Passover with his family, and is thereafter regarded by his neighbors as the town fool (Saposnik 103). Irving Saposnik looks to Ruth Wisse, who views the story as not only a Chelm-like tale, but also as “a multilayered story that . . . may be read as (1) the plight of the Diaspora Jew, (2) a mockery of authority, and (3) a comic quest for identity” (Saposnik 103).

Wisse views the Jews of Sholom Aleichem’s oeuvre as a kind of “schlemiel people”—without power or fortune, but with a kind of spiritual purity and optimism. She turns to Maurice Samuel to explain how Sholom Aleichem’s humor helped the Jews of his time to bear their sufferings. Samuel wrote that “it is more than a therapeutic resistance to the destructive frustrations and humiliations of the Exile. It was the application of a

fantastic technique that the Jews had developed over the ages . . . to counter the torments and discriminations to which they were continuously subjected. It was a technique of avoidance and sublimation; also a technique of theoretical reversal. They had found the trick of converting disaster into a verbal triumph, applying a sort of Talmudic ingenuity of interpretation to events they could not handle in their reality” (54; qtd. in Wisse 44). Wisse quotes a portion of a Sholom Aleichem story, “Dreyfus in Kasrilevke,” in which a character named Zaidl, the only member of the community with access to a newspaper, recounts the verdict of the second Dreyfus trial to his neighbors. The citizens of Kasrilevka react to the verdict with disbelief and outrage—not at the judge or the witnesses, but at Zaidl. “‘It can't be!’” they cry. “‘The heavens and the earth have promised that the truth must always come out on top, just as oil comes to the top of water! What will you tell us next? What lies? What stories?’” (qtd. in Wisse 45). Wisse comments, “Dreyfus in Kasrilevke is judged by God’s law; and is God’s truth to be sacrificed by journalism?” To the citizens of Kasrilevke, the ideal is more real than the real; faith is more powerful than facts.

Much of Jewish humor is based on incongruity between the real and the ideal. The Messianic ideal of being chosen did not fit with the reality of continuous persecution. Intellectual power, gained from Talmudic study, did not prevent external powerlessness. And the strength of being a geographically, culturally, and linguistically distinct community became a weakness as that community became increasingly segregated and isolated. The shtetl Jews became highly sensitized to incongruities, and they resolved them through humor (Schlesinger 318).

Irving Howe has suggested that they might even have become skeptical of their “chosen” status, writing that the Jewish people, “despite its pride . . . was much too realistic not to recognize how grandiose an anomaly was the contrast between its claim and its

position. Hence the characteristic strategy of its humor was an irony which measured the distance between pretension and actuality, held it up for public inspection and then made of it the salt of self-ridicule” (19). Yet others maintain that the Messianic expectancy remained real and vivid. It coexisted with irony in such expressions as “He’ll get here when the Messiah comes” (Knox 333).

In either case, one must marvel at a people who forged humor out of a history of hardship and persecution. Even more remarkably, it is built around a basic framework of optimism and hope. This is, arguably, one of the greatest incongruities in the history of humor.

Chapter 3

“We Are What We Pretend to Be”: Locating the Truth in *Mother Night*

Kurt Vonnegut's *Mother Night* has received scant attention as a Holocaust narrative. Yet it fits quite comfortably within this genre, because of its historical setting and because of the moral ambiguity—characteristic of so much Holocaust writing—that lies at its heart. Unlike most Holocaust narratives, in which the protagonist is a victim, *Mother Night* features a protagonist who may, or may not, be considered a perpetrator. Howard W. Campbell, Jr., is an American, raised in Germany, who is asked by the Allies to act as a spy for them. He accepts this role, which involves broadcasting brutal, inflammatory anti-Semitic propaganda. Thus, he does much harm, although it is ostensibly for a good cause. This is the kind of irony—rife with possibilities for dark humor—that writers such as Vonnegut relish.

In *Mother Night* Vonnegut plays with contradictions: appearance and reality, truth and deception, opacity and clarity. Most significantly, he considers the relationships among intentions, actions, and consequences. Can we really know and trust our own intentions? What about the intentions of others? Can we ever be certain of how our words or actions will be interpreted and acted upon? Can the best of intentions ever justify actions that bring about disastrous consequences? Vonnegut condenses these concerns within the first lines of *Mother Night*, in which he writes, “This is the only story of mine whose moral I know. I don’t think it’s a marvelous moral; I simply happen to know what it is: We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be” (v).

He plays, as well, with identity. His Introduction is followed by a signed “Editor’s Note” in which he obscures his own identity in relation to the text by posing as editor of the “confessions” of a historical person—Howard W. Campbell, Jr. Thus, he crosses what

Patricia Waugh calls the “ontological divide,” dissolving the distinction between life and fiction (Broer 208, n. 2). (*Mother Night*, Vonnegut’s first metafictional work, with its several layers of textuality, has been compared in complexity to the self-reflexive works of such later writers as Donald Barthelme and John Barth by Vonnegut scholar Jerome Klinkowitz [521]).

Vonnegut the editor immediately points out that the purpose, or at least the effect, of Campbell’s writings may have been to deceive. He elaborates: “To say that he was a writer is to say that the demands of art alone were enough to make him lie, and to lie without seeing any harm in it. To say that he was a playwright is to offer an even harsher warning to the reader, for no one is a better liar than a man who has warped lives and passions onto something as grotesquely artificial as a stage.” He continues, “And, now that I’ve said that about lying, I will risk the opinion that lies told for the sake of artistic effect—in the theater, for instance, and in Campbell’s confessions, perhaps, can be, in a higher sense, the most beguiling form of truth” (ix-x). It is noteworthy that he never calls them the most reliable form of truth. Was Campbell an autobiographer, a journalist, or an artist? Is an artistic representation the same as a lie? Is Vonnegut, the author, lying? Vonnegut plays, finally, with the very nature of truth.

Klinkowitz identifies “unraveling the truth” as the substance of *Mother Night*. Because Vonnegut has made his relationship to Campbell ambiguous, the reader can never be certain of whether it is Vonnegut’s version of the truth that is being presented or Campbell’s. This problem is exacerbated by the biographical similarities between Vonnegut and Campbell.

Vonnegut has asserted that “people tend to make dramas or fictions of their own lives” (Reed 69), and he, himself, may have done just that in creating Howard W.

Campbell, Jr. Campbell was an American, raised in Germany. Vonnegut was American of German descent. This is revealed in his Introduction to *Mother Night*, in which he also refers to the “Nazi monkey business” that took place in the 1930s Indianapolis of his youth. Specifically, he recalls the “vile and lively native American Fascists” who slipped him a copy of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, in which the Jews’ “secret plans for world domination” were exposed. He recounts the story of his aunt, who married a “*German German*” and had to offer the German government proof that she had no “Jewish blood,” noting that the mayor of Indianapolis “had fun putting ribbons and official seals all over the documents the Germans required, which made them look like eighteenth-century peace treaties” (v-vi). Yet being a German-American during the world wars was generally anything but fun. Anti-German sentiment was a fact of American life, and German-American parents, including Vonnegut’s, discouraged displays of German culture and the use of the German language (Rackstraw 54).

Vonnegut then reviews his experiences as an American soldier and, ultimately, prisoner of war in Germany. He entered the war troubled at the prospect of fighting against relatives and family friends still in Germany (Schaff 43). It also has been speculated that “he must have been amazed by the paradox of his own capture, imprisonment, and abuse in Germany by what could have been his countrymen, an irony compounded when, as a prisoner of war, he was one of the few survivors of the Dresden fire-bombing by what actually were his own countrymen” (Rackstraw 54).

He concludes his Introduction, “So much for the Nazis and me. If I’d been born in Germany, I suppose I would have *been* a Nazi, bopping Jews and gypsies and Poles around, leaving boots sticking out of snowbanks, warming myself with my secretly virtuous insides. So it goes” (vii-viii). Vonnegut here is acknowledging the roles chance, circumstances, and

expectations play in forming one's character and, thus, determining one's actions.

Additionally, he is foreshadowing Campbell's self-delusion and denial. Yet this excuse is hardly convincing; almost certainly, it was not meant to be. He is far more concerned with free will and personal responsibility than with mere chance. Lawrence R. Broer notes that both Vonnegut and Campbell are "engaged in a struggle with guilt and pessimism, and that both write from a seemingly numb and detached point of view that masks a tortured conscience." He notes further, though, that both dare to "venture into their own heart of darkness, their own 'Mother Night,' to expose the capacity for cruelty and moral blindness within the soul of every man and woman" (46). Still, it is worth noting that Campbell shows no signs of a guilty conscience while he is broadcasting his propaganda. Only after the passage of many years is he willing to introspect and to accept responsibility for his actions and their consequences.

The novel's title, *Mother Night*, comes from Goethe's *Faust*. Mephistopheles states, "I am a part of the part that at first was all, part of the darkness that gave birth to light, that supercilious light which now disputes with Mother Night her ancient rank and space, and yet cannot succeed; no matter how it struggles, it sticks to matter and can't get free. Light flows from substance, makes it beautiful; solids can check its path, so I hope it won't be long til light and the world's stuff are destroyed together" (qtd. in Vonnegut, *Mother Night* xii). Howard W. Campbell, Jr., is torn between the forces of darkness and light. During the years of his malevolent broadcasts, the world was similarly torn—and there were times when the victory of darkness seemed inevitable and the light seemed about to be extinguished. Just as light "sticks to matter and can't be free," and "flows from substance," decency and courage are useless abstract concepts unless they are possessed, demonstrated, and defended by man. Campbell initially believes that his intentions are

benign, rendering him blameless. But over the course of the novel, this belief becomes difficult, and finally impossible, to sustain. Good intentions alone are useless.

While one part of him risks “venturing into his own heart of darkness,” another part wishes only to flee reality. He longs to return to childhood, when roles can be tried out and abandoned without consequence. With his wife, Helga, he creates a private world—*Das Reich der Zwei*—into which he can retreat and evade responsibility. Because he is an artist of sorts, the inclination to create alternative worlds is natural to him. He specializes in writing romances—a genre in which reality is distorted and good and evil are viewed in the most simplistic terms. When Campbell asks Major Frank Wirtanen, who is attempting to recruit him as a spy, what he learned about him from his plays, Wirtanen replies, “that you admire pure hearts and heroes, that you love good and hate evil, and that you believe in romance” (39). In other words, that he is naïve and one-dimensional—someone who will do what he is told to do without understanding its implications merely for the glamour of it. Critic James Lundquist notes the irony of Campbell’s romantic illusions being compatible with the spirit of the times. Hitler thought of himself as a crusader, and he actually commissioned a portrait of himself as a knight on a quest (31).

Campbell identifies himself as an apolitical man. He readily admits that his plays are “medieval romances, about as political as chocolate éclairs” (33). When Wirtanen first approaches him, he asks him what he thinks of “the things going on in Germany. Hitler and the Jews and all that.” Campbell replies, “It isn’t anything I can control, so I don’t think about it” (35). He admits, too, that he was basically neutral toward the Nazis, who, after all, constituted an enthusiastic audience for his plays. Even as he is speaking with Wirtanen, he comments that he still cannot think of them as perpetrators of atrocity, having “worked too hard . . . for their trust and applause” (36). Later on in the novel, when he is

asked by Resi, posing as Helga, about the nature of his politics, he replies, ““Ask me about music. . . . Ask me what kinds of music I like these days. . . . I have some opinions on music. I have no political opinions at all”” (92).

At this point Campbell and Vonnegut diverge. Vonnegut was political, and he often stated his belief (in accordance with those of Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin, as he facetiously observed) that art, especially writing, should serve society (Lundquist 14). Yet he created a hero who harms society. Art, obviously, is informed by the imagination; but expressing what one is imagining is not the moral equivalent of lying. Art becomes dishonest or immoral when it is the product of a dishonest or immoral artist. There is also the question of whether the artist is intentionally dishonest or delusional.

Much has been written about Campbell’s alleged “schizophrenia.” Marc Leeds, for example, suggests that Vonnegut’s “hyphenated” ethnicity (German-American) led him to use schizophrenia as a metaphor in several of his works—most prominently in *Mother Night*. Here, Vonnegut created a hero whose ethnic makeup mirrored his own and who is identified by Leeds as schizophrenic. Campbell, himself, uses schizophrenia as an excuse for his actions, commenting, “But I’ve always known what I did. I’ve always been able to live with what I did. How? Through that simple and widespread boon to mankind—schizophrenia”(179). Critic Conrad Festa writes that a central object of satire for Vonnegut is “man’s inclination to avoid painful reality.” He notes that in *Mother Night*, in particular, Vonnegut focuses on “the human ability to willfully neglect simple, available knowledge in order to maintain insane ideas and attitudes” (146). The key word here is “willfully”; if Campbell’s neglect is willful, can he be thought of as schizophrenic? Leeds notes that Campbell is “incapable of distinguishing his core self in the face of his many parts”—and this is probably true. He writes, further, that “schizophrenia is presented as

the predominant operational activity enabling all the characters to live in harmony with their many selves” (82). Leeds attributes Campbell’s predicament to “the confluence of heredity, opportunity, and political upheaval” (83).

Sometimes it is difficult to tell whether Leeds and other critics are writing of metaphoric schizophrenia or actual, clinical schizophrenia. Arguably, it would be well to lay aside this model of disease and think of Campbell’s actions as conscious and self-willed. If he did not know what the consequences of his actions would be, it is because he deliberately suppressed that knowledge. It would be more accurate to think of Campbell as weak, selfish, cynical, and ultimately immoral than to think of him as sick. It would have made little sense for Vonnegut to write of someone not responsible for his actions; he is not a psychotherapist, and his version of a case study would have been of little importance. In *Mother Night*, responsibility is *everything*. Doris Lessing wrote, “What Vonnegut deals with, always, is responsibility.”

On the other hand, it would have made little sense for Vonnegut to write of someone unambiguously evil. This would have made for a comparatively shallow, insignificant book. Lessing also wrote that Vonnegut returned again and again to the problem of “the ambiguities of complicity” (35).

Campbell was complicit in the crimes of Nazism—and he knew it. Vonnegut makes this clear even before the story proper begins. In his Editor’s Note he alludes to a comment Campbell made in “a chapter of the book that he later discarded”: “I wrote the dedication—‘To Mata Hari.’ She whored in the interest of espionage, and so did I” (xii). On page 2, Campbell admits that he always wrote of the S.S. with enthusiasm. He recalls the typewriter upon which he wrote his propaganda, and particularly the key with the symbol of the S.S., adding, “I never abbreviated it as ‘S.S.’, but always struck the typewriter

key for the far more frightening and magical twin lightning strokes.” The mystique and power of the S.S. resonated with him more profoundly than the terror the organization represented.

A few pages later, Campbell recounts an incident involving one Arpad Kovacs—a guard in the Israeli prison where Campbell is awaiting trial for war crimes. During this incident Campbell identifies himself to the reader as “a Nazi radio propagandist, a shrewd and loathsome anti-Semite” (12). Kovacs is wrapped in the same moral ambiguity that enshrouds Campbell. During the war, he had obtained false papers and not only passed as an Aryan, but joined the S.S. At the same time that he was an ardent Nazi, he was leaking critical information to the Jewish prisoners. And now he serves the Israelis by guarding people who committed the very crimes he, himself, had committed.

Campbell has provided Kovacs with a portion of his confession, to which Kovacs responds by shouting, “Give it to those complacent bastards. Tell those smug briquets.” Briquets, Campbell explains, are “people who did nothing to save their own lives or anybody else’s life when the Nazis took over, who were willing to go meekly all the way to the gas chambers, if that was where the Nazis wanted them to go” (11). “Tell them the things a man does to stay alive!” Kovacs enjoins Campbell (12).

The things a man does to stay alive: this is the issue at the core of Holocaust writing. How selfish is it permissible to be? How much sacrifice can one be expected to make? How much responsibility for others can one be expected to bear? What are we to do when the goals of surviving and of maintaining one’s humanity collide? Finally, has anyone the right to judge anyone else’s responses to these dilemmas? These questions, perhaps, have never been more incisively explored than by Primo Levi in his essay “The Gray Zone,” which appears in his collection *The Drowned and the Saved*. He considers the phenomenon of the

prisoner hierarchy in the concentration camps. (He, himself, was a prisoner at Auschwitz.) It became immediately apparent to the new arrivals that there was a class of privileged prisoners. Writing of a typical member of this class, Levi observes, “He wants to tame you, extinguish any spark of dignity that he has lost and you perhaps still preserve” (41). Resisting these people was a serious transgression that elicited serious consequences. It is the space occupied by these prisoner-functionaries that Levi identifies as “a gray zone . . . where the two camps of masters and servants both diverge and converge” (42). This, he writes, confuses our need to judge. He makes the astute statement that “it [was] not enough to relegate [the prisoner-functionaries] to marginal tasks; the best way to bind them [was] to burden them with guilt, cover them with blood, compromise them as much as possible, thus establishing a bond of complicity so that they [could] no longer turn back” (43). Levi states that the prisoner-functionaries were also moved to collaborate by a combination of “terror, ideological seduction, servile imitation of the victor, myopic desire for any power whatsoever, even though ridiculously circumscribed in time and space, cowardice, and finally, lucid calculation aimed at eluding the imposed orders and order” (43). He concludes this part of the essay by asserting that it would be “imprudent” to issue hasty moral judgments on those trapped in this predicament. He addresses the issue of the Kapos—those in positions of command—and admits that “judgment becomes more tentative” for them. The Jews who voluntarily joined their ranks did so in hope of becoming exempted from Hitler’s Final Solution.

Levi makes the critical point that “even if one did not wish to take into account the infernal environment into which [the prisoners] had been abruptly flung, it is illogical to demand—and rhetorical and false to maintain—that they all and always followed the behavior expected of saints and stoic philosophers” (49). In their struggle to survive, “the

room for choices (especially moral choices) was reduced to zero” (50).

Levi moves on to the most difficult class of prisoner-functionaries to fathom—the Sonderkommandos. It was their responsibility to sort the new arrivals’ possessions, to send them efficiently to the gas chambers, to remove the corpses from the chambers and divest them of any usable materials, to bring the corpses to the crematoria, and to remove and dispose of the ashes. Far from receiving special privileges, these people received early death sentences so that none of them could reveal what they had seen and done.

Early in *Mother Night*, Vonnegut introduces us to another of his Israeli guards—Andor Gutman, a former Sonderkommando who had survived by lasting until “the orders came from Himmler to close the ovens down” (7). Gutman had volunteered for this special detail, and now he is at a complete loss to explain why. He tells Campbell of the music that had emanated from the loudspeakers at Auschwitz all day long, interrupted by announcements. “All day long, music and announcements,” he recalls. “Very modern,” Campbell flippantly replies. One of the most frequently heard announcements was “Corpse-carriers to the guardhouse.” “After two years of hearing that call over the loudspeakers, between music” Gutman tells Campbell, “the position of corpse carrier suddenly sounded like a very good job” (9). Campbell expresses his understanding, and assures Gutman that he has nothing to be ashamed of; Gutman remains unconvinced. Is Campbell being characteristically cynical, or does he understand, on some level, the futility of passing judgment on someone trapped in an absurd environment? Certainly, Vonnegut understands.

The Sonderkommandos were often Jews, and Levi recognizes “this paroxysm of perfidy and hatred: it must be the Jews who put the Jews into the ovens; it must be shown that the Jews, the subrace, the submen, bow to any and all humiliation, even to destroying themselves” (52). He continues: “Conceiving and organizing the squads was National

Socialism's most demonic crime. . . . This institution represented an attempt to shift onto others, specifically, the victims, the burden of guilt, so that they were deprived of even the solace of innocence" (53). Further, Levi sees the existence of the squads as a message:

"We, the master race, are your destroyers, but you are no better than we are; if we so wish, and we do so wish, we can destroy not only your bodies, but also your souls, just as we have destroyed ours"(54).

He illustrates this with what is, arguably, the centerpiece of his book: the story of a soccer game between the S.S. and the Sonderkommandos, who saw themselves as colleagues. The game occurred during a "work pause." Those who were not on the improvised playing field cheered their teams on, and took bets, "as if, rather than at the gates of hell, the games were taking place on the village green" (55). Levi comments that "behind the armistice one hears satanic laughter: it is consummated, we have succeeded, you are no longer the other race, the anti-race, the prime enemy of the millennial Reich; you are no longer the people who reject idols. We have embraced you, corrupted you, dragged you to the bottom with us. You are like us, you proud people: dirtied with your own blood, as we are. You too, like us and like Cain, have killed the brother. Come, we can play together" (55).

Levi had, in fact, a good ear for satanic laughter. In his several works examining his Holocaust experience, he maintains a tone of gravity and respect appropriate to the subject. Still, there is a current of dark humor running through them. *The Drowned and the Saved*, for example, is arguably Levi's most angry, judgmental book. Yet within its pages the boundaries between reality and black humor dissolve as he describes real-life situations, such as the above-described soccer game, that the best of black humorists could not have made up.

Similarly, in *The Periodic Table*, Levi, trained as a chemist, playfully yet bitterly uses chemical elements as metaphors. He writes that chemistry and physics “were the antidote to Fascism . . . because they were clear and distinct and verifiable at every step, and not a tissue of lies and emptiness, like the radio and newspapers” (42). In the chapter entitled “Lead,” evoking the image of the smoke and ashes of the crematoria, he writes, “lead is actually the metal of death: because it brings on death, because its weight is a desire to fall, and to fall is a property of corpses, because its very color is dulled-dead. . . . Lead is a material different from all other materials, a metal which you feel is tired, perhaps tired of transforming itself and that does not want to transform itself anymore: the ashes of who knows how many other elements full of life, which thousands upon thousands of years ago were burned in their own fire” (87). Levi’s recognition of the dark humor and absurdity of the Holocaust experience enriches our understanding of it.

Shortly after relating the story of the soccer game, Levi proclaims, “I believe that no one is authorized to judge [the Sonderkommandos], not those who lived through the experience of the Lager and even less those who did not” (59). He explains this statement by noting “the almost physical necessity with which political coercion gives birth to [an] ill-defined sphere of ambiguity and compromise” (67). We can add another layer of ambiguity by noting that in proclaiming “no one is authorized to judge,” Levi is, in fact, rendering a judgment.

Where does the case of Howard W. Campbell, Jr., fit within this discourse of guilt, complicity, and judgment? He was not a prisoner, although he was, in his way, a functionary. The Nazis established a bond of complicity with him not by manipulating him into performing brutal, gruesome tasks but by persuading him—effortlessly, as far as we can tell—into disseminating brutal, harmful propaganda. They seduced him not with

ideology but with the vague promise of power and romance. There is no mention in the book of coercion. The all-important difference between Campbell and the Holocaust victim-perpetrators Levi describes is that *Campbell had the power to choose*.

Yet as we delve deeper into the text, it becomes necessary to consider the possibility that Campbell had no more power to choose than any of us do in this fundamentally absurd world. Critics have weighed in on both sides of this issue. Robert Merrill notes that Jerome Klinkowitz “identifies Vonnegut’s metaphysical theme as his belief that mankind should reject responsibility for an absurd universe” (8). While Vonnegut recognized that the universe, through no fault of man, is absurd, he never advocated rejecting one’s responsibility to act morally, ethically, and compassionately within it.

It was noted earlier that Doris Lessing considered Vonnegut’s essential theme to be responsibility. She notes Vonnegut’s depiction of Campbell years after the war—dazed and confused over the question of his own guilt—and cites this as an example of Vonnegut’s understanding of “the ambiguities of complicity.” Lessing considers whether Campbell had given any thought to—whether he was aware of—the possible repercussions of his acts while he was engaged in committing them. She notes that Campbell compares himself favorably to Eichmann, as when he says, “My case is different. I always know when I tell a lie, am capable of imagining the cruel consequences of anybody’s believing my lies, know cruelty is wrong. I could no more lie without noticing it than I could unknowingly pass a kidney stone” (Vonnegut 166). Thus, Campbell lied but essentially did not care.

In *Mother Night*, Campbell actually meets Eichmann in prison before offering the above-quoted comment. Vonnegut imagines the meeting as follows:

“May I ask you a personal question?” I said.

“Certainly,” he said benignly. . . .

“Do you feel that you’re guilty of murdering six million Jews?” I said.

“Absolutely not,” said the architect of Auschwitz, the introducer of conveyer belts into crematoria, the greatest customer in the world for a gas called Cyklon-B. (165)

Eichmann never admits to the lies he told about the Jews. In fact, in his mind he was not lying; he fully believed Nazi racial theory. His lie was in denying responsibility for the deadly program resulting from that theory. Campbell predicts, correctly, that Eichmann’s defense will be that he was only following orders. He comments, “As a friend of the court that will try Eichmann, I offer my opinion that Eichmann cannot distinguish between right and wrong—that not only right and wrong, but truth and falsehood, hope and despair, beauty and ugliness, kindness and cruelty, comedy and tragedy, are all processed by Eichmann’s mind indiscriminately, like birdshot through a bugle” (166). Campbell concludes, “The more I think about Eichmann and me, the more I think that he should be sent to the hospital, and that I am the sort of person for whom punishments by fair, just men were devised” (166).

Campbell is, it seems, being too generous with Eichmann. Eichmann was an unrepentant anti-Semite, a liar who knew he was lying, and a coward. He spoke the truth about the Jews within the context of his own value system, but his own value system was sick and dangerous. He may not have understood that prejudice and persecution are wrong, but there is no evidence to suggest that he did not know that lying is wrong; still, he

blithely lied to try to save himself. Surely, there is no evidence to suggest that he could not distinguish between kindness and cruelty; he knew full well that he was being cruel but excused himself in the belief that his victims deserved such cruelty.

Every question in *Mother Night* raises more questions. Is Campbell less guilty than Eichmann because he was not truly an anti-Semite—just someone who incited anti-Semitism in others? Weren't the consequences of their actions essentially the same? Does that fact that Campbell knew the statements that he was making were false somehow give him the moral upper hand?

Lessing states that “Vonnegut simply cannot bear what we are.” Certainly, *Mother Night* suggests his frustration with our apathy, vanity, and capacity for moral blindness. Yet she acknowledges his awareness of our complexity—his refusal to categorize people as either wholly good or starkly evil. Further, she states that Vonnegut’s sorrow over what we are forces her to remember that in 1939, there were many who were calling for the United States and Great Britain to take a more aggressive stance toward Hitler—to stop him while he could still be stopped. Lessing states that Vonnegut “rubs our noses in the results of our missed chances,” and then reminds us of “how soon our judgments became warped by the horribleness of what was going on.” She explains that “almost all at once Good and Evil became polarized into Us and Them and quite forgotten was the knowledge that the war could have been prevented if our governments had wanted.” She concludes that responsibility for the whole horror that was World War II was “ours as much as theirs.” Her point—and it is an important one—is that in a world where too many are tempted to succumb to a feeling of helplessness, Vonnegut is willing to take responsibility.

Yet there are other critics and Vonnegut scholars, such as Lawrence R. Broer, who focus on the Vonnegut hero as victim. In his book entitled *Sanity Plea: Schizophrenia in*

the Novels of Kurt Vonnegut, Broer shows himself to be one of the many critics noted above who stress mental illness as metaphor in both social and individual contexts. It is a metaphor for the cruel, violent, self-destructive society that the Vonnegut hero inhabits. In this society, madness passes for normalcy, and, as Broer writes, “*all* our frames of reference are ambiguous and equivocal. Distinctions between sanity and insanity, between the schizoid individual and the psychotic, are problematical” (6). Vonnegut’s characters are beset by “bizarre phobias, paranoid delusions, masked aggression, and desperate escapist compulsions” (5). Eventually, they crawl into a kind of “schizophrenic shell” (6). Broer specifically identifies Howard W. Campbell, Jr., as such a hero.

He goes on to suggest that readers ask themselves whether such Vonnegut heroes are sick and in need of medical attention or, rather, particularly sane and even visionary. This is reminiscent of the above-quoted suggestion that lies told for the sake of art can be the most beguiling form of truth. *Mother Night* is, after all, a book of the sixties—a time when psychologists, such as R. D. Laing, were challenging accepted notions of mental illness by suggesting that insanity may be, in fact, a reasonable adaptation to an insane world. This is the kind of thinking that can lead to a moral relativism that finds excuses for transgressions of every kind and degree. Once again—Vonnegut acknowledges that the world we inhabit is insane; yet although he is understanding of how someone could succumb to this insanity, he is not altogether forgiving.

Campbell, on the other hand, is all too willing to relieve himself of blame for his transgressions. Late in *Mother Night*, he specifically states, “it was my world rather than myself that was diseased” (257). Most outrageously, he attempts to project this view onto his elderly neighbor Mrs. Epstein—an Auschwitz survivor. Nowhere in the novel does he demonstrate any inclination to try to change the world for the better. In fact, he memorably

justifies his inaction in a poem, written by him in 1937, entitled “Reflections on Not Participating in Current Events”:

I saw a huge steam roller,
 It blotted out the sun.
 The people all lay down, lay down;
 They did not try to run.
 My love and I, we looked amazed
 Upon this gory mystery.
 “Lie down, lie down!” the people cried.
 “The great machine is history!”
 My love and I, we ran away,
 The engine did not find us.
 We ran up to a mountain top,
 Left history far behind us.
 Perhaps we should have stayed and died,
 But somehow we don’t think so.
 We went to see where history’d been,
 And my, the dead did stink so. (122)

Campbell’s poem “stinks” from cynicism. On the one hand, he refuses to be steamrolled by history. On the other hand, he shows no ambition to try to alter the course of “the great machine,” and he has only contempt for its victims.

If Vonnegut is impatient with those mired in inertia, he is downright contemptuous of those pumped up with ideological fanaticism. His portrayal of what Campbell, himself, refers to as “the classic totalitarian mind” is the source of much of the dark humor in the

book. Campbell defines such a mind as one “which might be likened unto a system of gears whose teeth have been filed off at random. Such a snaggletoothed thought machine, driven by a standard or even a substandard libido, whirls with the jerky, noisy, gaudy pointlessness of a cuckoo clock in Hell” (224).

One possessor of such a mind is Bernard B. O’Hare—the ignorant, self-righteous American “patriot” who sees himself in terms of pure good and Campbell in terms of pure evil. He is “every bit as fanatical, narrow-minded, and violent as the worst Nazi. Like the ‘American fascists’ that Vonnegut knew as a boy, O’Hare reminds readers that American patriotism and German fascism [can be] cousins, if not brothers” (Marvin 235). There is also the Reverend Doctor Lionel Jason David Jones, D. D. S., D. D., publisher of *The White Christian Minuteman*. Jones had been expelled from dental school for advancing his theory that the teeth of Jews and African Americans were proof of their innate degeneracy. He later wrote a book, *Christ Was Not a Jew*, that, Vonnegut writes, “combined not only dentistry and theology, but the fine arts as well. . . . He proved his point by reproducing in the book fifty famous paintings of Jesus. According to Jones, not one painting showed Jewish jaws or teeth” (67).

Vonnegut pointedly named Jones’s bodyguard August Krapptauer. His claim to fame was arranging a joint meeting of the German-American Bund and the Ku Klux Klan. “At that meeting, Krapptauer declared that the Pope was a Jew and that the Jews held a fifteen-million-dollar mortgage on the Vatican” (Vonnegut 73). Jones’s secretary was an unfrocked Paulist Father who still went by the name of Father Keeley. He had been chaplain of a Detroit gun club whose dream was to shoot Jews. With these characters, among others, Vonnegut portrays the tragic irony of cruelty and injustice taking place in the name of goodness.

Vonnegut wrote both O'Hare and Jones as caricatures; Campbell is much more like someone we might actually know, or be. Although it is difficult to argue that Vonnegut feels affection for Campbell, it is clear to see that he understands him and the forces that helped make him what he is. One of Vonnegut's themes in *Mother Night* is that people are neither pure good nor pure evil, neither entirely self-aware nor self-deluding, but rather a complex, confounding blend.

Writing from a distinctly postmodern perspective, Vonnegut projects a belief in the uncertainty of reality and, thus, the arbitrariness of truth (Han 759). Tony Tanner points out that within *Mother Night* Vonnegut makes use of a variety of documents—books, letters, magazines, recordings—to suggest the existence of numerous versions of reality (185). Exacerbating the problem of an unknowable reality is Campbell, himself—the ultimate unreliable narrator.

In Chapter 1 of this dissertation, it was noted that because of unprecedented events such as the Holocaust, reality has become more fantastic than fantasy, challenging our ability to represent it. As one critic put it, “the very term ‘fiction’ seems no longer to have any currency” (Lundquist 69). Writers such as Vonnegut attempted to meet the challenge of representing this new reality with new themes and forms.

Leslie Fiedler identified Vonnegut as a transitional writer—one who added depth to pop art but who failed to produce high art. A number of other critics have attempted to trivialize Vonnegut in this manner. They write condescendingly of him as a science-fiction writer. Yet science fiction—with its deliberate blurring of the line between reality and fantasy—was the perfect genre within which Vonnegut could express his doubts about the reliability of our vision of reality (Leeds and Reed 3). With *Mother Night*, Vonnegut tried his hand at another pop form—the spy novel. He saw the postmodernist possibilities of this

genre, as well, recognizing espionage as a world of total alienation where appearance and reality almost always clash (Leeds and Reed 12). Fiedler also points to the apparent antipathy to religion in *Mother Night*; the religious leaders that appear are neo-Nazi madmen.

The kind of self-reflexive fiction represented by *Mother Night* was a bold, new form at the time of the book's publication. Vonnegut is an author who writes about writing and understands that language can be as elusive as life. In *Mother Night*, in particular, he demonstrates that writing can be an unreliable conveyer of truth. Loree Rackstraw points to "the irony that he was using language to explore the curious and powerful and sometimes even dangerous nature of language itself—how it . . . can influence our perceptions and what we take to be real, and thus can actually shape our system of values and ethics" (53). This is made explicit in the case of Howard W. Campbell, Jr., who writes with the intention of promoting good while he is actually promoting evil and ends up giving aide and comfort to the enemy while being perceived as the enemy by his own countrymen. "His naive use of language has caused him to actually be what he thought he was only pretending to be" (Rackstraw 54). Rackstraw concludes with the observation that history is shaped by the way we use and interpret language.

In addition, "*Mother Night* plays with the time and space of printed narrative—to suggest what the very idea of representation can do to a human being" (Klinkowitz 53). Hence Campbell's complaint: "The part of me that wanted to tell the truth got turned into an expert liar! The lover in me got turned into a pornographer! The artist in me got turned into ugliness such as the world has rarely seen before" (206).

Vonnegut's novel is characterized by numerous short chapters with attention-

grabbing titles. There are also dizzying shifts in time and place, which may be seen as a reflection of Vonnegut's disjunctive view of human nature (Lundquist 19). Jerome Klinkowitz points out that the story the novel tells is already familiar to everyone—how the Nazis rose to power, provoked a war that they initially appeared to be winning, and then “collapsed in a Gotterdammerung that scrambled personal lives and national identities for a generation afterward.” He adds, “By making his narrative such a necessarily mixed-up affair Vonnegut is defamiliarizing the material, making it impossible for readers to proceed as if they already know the story. By turning things upside down and inside out within each chapter, and from jumping constantly in time and space from one chapter to the next, he keeps readerly attention fresh and, most importantly, receptive to new and surprising ideas” (54). Arguably the most distinctive feature of Vonnegut's work is his humor—which has proven complex and difficult to classify. He is frequently linked with early black humorists such as Terry Southern, Bruce J. Friedman, and Stanley Elkin. These writers, as critic James Lundquist notes, share a propensity for taking tragic material and giving it grotesquely comic treatment. Lundquist identifies a number of stylistic devices common to them, including “self-conscious artifice, a mocking tone, despair over the possibility of ever correcting human vices, and a tendency to draw imagery from . . . pop culture” (19). This last device is evident within the pages of *Mother Night*, where we find characters named Campbell, Heinz, and Kraft. Jerome Klinkowitz sees this as part of Vonnegut's comic strategy of mixing “the loftiest of moral thoughts with the most vulgar forms of slapstick comedy” (61). *Mother Night* frequently shocks by combining radically dissimilar elements, such as portraying the masterminds of Nazi atrocities relaxing over a game of ping-pong (Klinkowitz 55). “History often goes hand-in-hand with sports,” Vonnegut observes (*Mother Night* 52).

Lundquist notes the numerous “funny lines, bizarre images, and smart remarks” that stand out in *Mother Night* (33). Even before the novel proper begins, in his Introduction, Vonnegut recalls what is the defining moment of his work, if not his life—his experience as a prisoner of war during the firebombing of Dresden. He and his battalion were saved by being in a meat-locker under a slaughterhouse. He writes that “if we had gone above to take a look, we would have been turned into artifacts characteristic of firestorms: seeming pieces of charred firewood two or three feet long—ridiculously small human beings, or jumbo fried grasshoppers, if you will. . . . Everything was gone but the cellars where 135,000 Hansels and Gretels had been baked like gingerbread men” (vii). The bizarre images of jumbo fried grasshoppers and Hansel-and-Gretel corpses grab our attention, and so does the offhand tone. Yet they do more than that. They strip away any vestige of sentimentality from Vonnegut’s recollection and, ironically, allow his raw despair to show through. These images call forth the kind of laughter through tears characteristic of so much Jewish humor.

According to Klinkowitz, the early black humorists provoked and shocked through theme and language but made little use of technical innovation. This would separate Vonnegut from them. Yet, as noted in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, humor theorist Alan Pratt finds considerable innovation in black humor—specifically noting the kind of “rapidly shifting narratives and hazy boundaries between reality, hallucination, and fantasy” (xxii) that characterize Vonnegut’s work. Lundquist is firmly in Pratt’s camp on this question.

The aim of these early black humorists was, largely, to rebel against the values of 1950s America. Klinkowitz comments that their work looked backward, whereas Vonnegut’s was “forward looking, and his argument was never against America in its mid-century stability. Instead he worried about threats to such values, among them institutional

power and corporate anonymity” (177). Thus, although Klinkowitz places Vonnegut alongside such innovative writers as Thomas Pynchon, Donald Barthelme, Jerzy Kosinski, and William H. Gass, he points out that Vonnegut—some ten years older than these writers—could remember the Great Depression, from which he learned firsthand how supposedly stable economic, social, and cultural values could be abruptly altered, with profound consequences. Vonnegut was, possibly, the more mature—perhaps even old-fashioned—artist.

In Chapter 1 of this dissertation, it also was noted that Pratt said of black humor: “while it bitterly ridicules institutions, value systems, and traditions, black humor offers neither explicit nor implicit proposals for improving, reforming, or changing the painful realities on which it focuses” (xix). Thus Pratt, too, puts some distance between Vonnegut and the black humorists. Vonnegut not only sanctioned mid-century American values; he also proposed, at least implicitly, a means of defending them: personal responsibility.

Lundquist, probably correctly, identifies the central characteristic of Vonnegut and the black humorists as “suspicion of easy explanations and solutions to human problems, and the meaning of existence” (20). He writes that Vonnegut is “skeptical about the sufficiency of systems, be they metaphysical, theological, or psychological, in either comforting us or giving purpose to our lives. He consequently writes, most of the time, as an observer of the laughable despair that results from adherence to these systems” (20). The imposition of purpose upon the universe can lead to the imposition of dangerous solutions, as well, such as the Final Solution carried out by the Nazis in *Mother Night* (Lundquist 29-30).

Lundquist continues, “Vonnegut’s universe is pluralistic—that is, there is no

necessary plan behind it, no necessary interlocking of the parts according to a single logical scheme—and the only operative plan for man is to be ready to be pragmatic, to try out all possibilities until one that works is found” (20). Vonnegut, himself, has acknowledged that this type of humor “goes against the American storytelling grain. . . . There is the implication that if you just have a little more energy, a little more fight, the problem can always be solved. This is so untrue that it makes me want to cry—or laugh” (qtd. in Lundquist 20).

There has been considerable discussion, as well, about Vonnegut as a satirist. One of Vonnegut’s first serious reviews was C. D. B. Bryan’s “Kurt Vonnegut on Target” in the *New Republic*. It addressed four Vonnegut novels, including *Mother Night*. The review was generally favorable, with one major reservation. As Robert Merrill, who includes Bryan’s review in his collection *Critical Essays on Kurt Vonnegut*, notes, “Bryan characterized Vonnegut as a satirist who seems always to fall short of the great satiric models” (2). Bryan had suggested that “what prevents Vonnegut from being a major satirist on the order, say, of John Barth is that Vonnegut takes very little seriously, and although he excels at that more gentle barb Irony, he lacks the anger and impatience which great satire demands” (Bryan 32). Certainly, it is unfair to state that Vonnegut “takes very little seriously.” Just as unfair is the assumption that Vonnegut is lacking in justifiable anger and impatience. In fact, Bryan, himself, appears to do some backtracking at the conclusion of his review, when he writes, “all the anger, the shame, the shock, the compassion, the irony, the control to produce great satire are *there*. . . . Why, then, does Vonnegut settle for such lovely, literate, amusing attacks upon such simple targets as scientists, engineers, computer technicians, religion, the American Legion, artists, company picnics?” (Bryan 36).

Merrill finds an answer to this question in a piece written the next year by Robert Scholes— “Fabulation and Satire,” a chapter in the book *The Fabulators*. In this piece Scholes argues that Vonnegut’s intention never was to satirize. He classifies Vonnegut as a black humorist and argues that black humorists are fabulators rather than satirists. The difference between black humor and satire, to Scholes, is more one of style, or tone, than of substance. Fabulators, Scholes explains, tend to be “more playful and more artful in construction” (74) than satirists. This playfulness enables protest to be expressed and perceived as comedy. He states, too, that black humor lacks “the rhetoric of moral certainty” that characterizes satire and that its practitioners “do not seek the superior position of the traditional moralists” (82). Its goal is to make us think rather than to provoke us to reform. Black comic writers have faith in “the humanizing value of laughter” (Scholes 74), and they seek to open our minds through laughter rather than through invective. Scholes characterizes Vonnegut’s work as “intellectual comedy” (82). He specifically takes exception to Bryan’s words quoted above, recognizing that they are based on the assumption that satire is superior to comedy. Scholes bluntly points out that there is no evidence that satire has ever cured any of the world’s ills, and he makes an educated guess that Vonnegut had come to the same conclusion. Specifically citing *Mother Night*, Scholes recognizes “an affection for the world and a desire to improve it—but not much hope for improvement” (78).

Howard W. Campbell, Jr., is a perfect black-humor protagonist. He is, above all, an outsider. Bruce Jay Friedman, one of the original twentieth-century black humorists, has suggested that one way to examine a society is to examine its outsiders. How did they get excluded? Why did they leave? Stanley Schatt suggests that Vonnegut uses Campbell the outsider to consider what motivates people to commit atrocities and how they are able to

live with themselves afterward (53).

Vonnegut also uses Campbell to probe the ways in which ordinary people survive in an absurd universe. It was posited in Chapter 2 of this dissertation that black humor has its roots in the shtetl tradition of the schlemiel and the schlimazel. The black-humor protagonist, as well as the schlemiel and the schlimazel, are all outsiders. All are unable to control their own fates. It is interesting to note that Vonnegut, himself, recognizes the similarity of his humor to what Freud called gallows humor—Jewish jokes about “small people being pushed this way and that, enormous armies and plagues and so forth, and still hanging on in the face of hopelessness” (Clancy, qtd. in Schaff 54). Could Campbell be a distant cousin of the Jewish schlemiel? Both are caught up in a vast cosmic joke that they are unable to “get.”

The Nazis in *Mother Night* are portrayed as jokes, as well—albeit monstrous ones. Campbell’s emotionally neutral descriptions of their antics add to the ironic humor of the book. The epitome of irony is reached when Reichsleiter Dr. Paul Joseph Goebbels, Head of the German Ministry of Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda and Campbell’s boss, asks Campbell to compose a work honoring the German soldiers martyred during the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. Campbell never gets around to writing this work, which had been tentatively entitled “Last Full Measure”—after the line in the Gettysburg Address in which Lincoln thanks the Union soldiers for giving “the last full measure of devotion” to their cause. This brings the Gettysburg Address to the attention of Goebbels, who is so impressed with this “very fine piece of propaganda” that he passes it on to Hitler, himself, with some trepidation—he fears *Abraham* Lincoln might have been Jewish. (Campbell assures him, “I’m sure his parents didn’t realize that it was a Jewish name. . . . If they’d known the name was Jewish, I’m sure they would have called him something more

American, like George or Stanley or Fred” [20].) Hitler is similarly moved. The irony of Lincoln’s desire to free the slaves being compared to Hitler’s desire to enslave—and annihilate—the Jews flies directly over Campbell’s head (Schaff 54-55).

Still, beneath the offhand irony of Vonnegut’s words, one can discern decency, kindness, and compassion. He is no misanthrope; he recognizes the predicament we are all caught up in together, and he sympathizes with us. As Jerome Klinkowitz and Donald L. Lawler write, “Vonnegut seems to be there in his fiction with a tolerant and reassuring irony to tell us that it is somehow all right, that humanity remains most worth caring about. No matter how evil, stupid, or inept we become as a culture or as a people, Vonnegut is there in his fiction reminding us not to give up on the human race. He is forever prompting us to recall that common humanity, a sense of decency, and good manners are the basis of civilized behavior, and civilized behavior is within almost everybody’s capabilities” (xv). They aptly call him “a humanist as well as a humorist” (xv).

There are details of Vonnegut’s biography that explain and exemplify his humanism. He has stated that both his parents were burdened by a constant sadness. In his mind, they were grieving for the loss of the world they had known and loved before the ravages of World War I (Lundquist 5). This sensitized him to individual pain and to the pain that history can inflict on the world. He showed his compassion when, in 1958, his sister and brother-in-law died within 36 hours of one another, leaving behind four young sons. Without hesitating, he and his first wife, Jane, adopted the three older boys and made them full members of their family, along with the couple’s own three children (Klinkowitz 32).

Vonnegut’s concern for the welfare of mankind has elicited charges of moralizing—charges to which he readily pleads guilty. He also admits, ““There is an

almost intolerable sentimentality beneath everything I write’” (*Wampeters* xxv). He suggests that he learned this sentimentality from a book entitled *More Heart Throbs* read to him by an African-American cook employed by his family when he was a child. He notes that he easily moved on to the *Spoon River Anthology* from there. Lundquist writes that “this emotional response is central to Vonnegut’s remedy for things” (13). He calls it “a distinctly . . . middle-class variety of pity,” but this is, perhaps, too harsh a judgment. Lundquist defines middle-class pity as “feeling sorry for those who do not have it so good” (13). This implies that Vonnegut somehow places himself separate from or above those he writes about or for. Yet he is known for placing himself, in some way, in all of his works. In *Mother Night*, as pointed out at the beginning of this chapter, he obscures his identity by posing as Campbell’s editor. “Sympathy” would be a better word than “pity.” There is a strong sense of “we are all in this together” in Vonnegut’s writings.

Tony Tanner has written of “a detectable strain of sentimental sententiousness which occurs in Vonnegut’s work” (184), and Donald L. Lawler has identified at least one scene in *Mother Night* as “sentimental to the point of bathos” (Klinkowitz and Lawler 199). Advice such as “Make love when you can. It’s good for you,” which concludes Vonnegut’s Introduction to *Mother Night*, is, indeed, cringe-worthy—especially when read decades after the sixties have passed. Still, overwhelmingly, the thoughts and feelings expressed in Vonnegut’s work—especially when considered within the context of his life—sound markedly personal, genuine, and sincere.

In light of this, it is particularly regrettable that Vonnegut was criticized after the publication of both *Mother Night* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* for trivializing the Holocaust. Robert B. Weide, who wrote and produced the 1996 screen adaptation of *Mother Night*, was warned by Vonnegut to expect some of the same criticism. Vonnegut had related to Weide

one critic's opinion that "anyone who found anything funny about the Holocaust was very sick." In the film, Weide had taken the daring, if possibly misguided, step of having Campbell utter the words, "In spite of everything, I still believe that people are basically good at heart"—a moment that he, himself, identifies as a "twisted reference to Anne Frank's heartbreaking epitaph" (Weide 109). Weide admits to some apprehension as to how his film would be received. Still, he claims that audiences seemed to understand the point of the film, which, to Weide, was "You are what you do" (110).

Looking back upon *Mother Night*, one might reasonably conclude that Howard W. Campbell, Jr., was not so ambiguous a figure, after all. His acceptance of his role was not motivated by any impulse to do good, and as far as we can tell, no good came of anything he did. This is appropriate for a book dealing with the Holocaust—a historical event out of which nothing good, valuable, or edifying emerged. Vonnegut understood this, about this particular event and about war in general, and he raged and grieved over it. What he describes as his sentimentality might better be understood as the good impulses of a fundamentally kind and decent man. It is his ability to create, out of those impulses, images of irrationality and pain that marks us. It is his ability to infuse these images with his own unique brand of dark humor that makes the mark indelible. It forces us to think hard, and in new ways, about his message. His message may be found in the last sentence of his Editor's Note, in which he describes Howard W. Campbell, Jr., as "a man who served evil too openly and good too secretly, the crime of his times" (xiii).

Chapter 4

King of the Jews: Alternative History, Impossible Alternatives

If memory is unreliable, historical truth elusive, and art subjective, what might we expect when we graft art onto history? Leslie Epstein has performed this operation with *King of the Jews*—a novel in which fiction coexists with fact and fact is frequently altered. The protagonist of the novel, Isaiah Chaim Trumpelman, is loosely based on Mordecai Chaim Rumkowski, who was the head of the Judenrat (Jewish Council) at the Lodz Ghetto.

Historical appropriation is not uncommon; numerous authors have incorporated history into their fiction, blurring the boundaries between the two. In *Mother Night*, discussed in Chapter 3 of this dissertation, Kurt Vonnegut inserts an entirely fictional character into the historical context of World War II. In 2004, in *The Plot Against America*, Philip Roth took the audacious step of rewriting the history of that period entirely. Fiction coexists with fact in this work to the point where we see Roth's Aunt Evelyn invited to dine with German foreign minister Joachim von Ribbentrop. Still more recently, in 2009, Quentin Tarantino's perversely entertaining film *Inglourious Basterds* portrays an incident of Holocaust history that clearly never took place. Its value lies in its offering an opportunity for catharsis for those still fantasizing about revenge.

King of the Jews, unlike these works, takes the reader directly into the world of the Holocaust victims—an emotionally fraught place to be. Furthermore, it makes use of a kind of outsized, dark humor in representing this world. At a time when Holocaust scholars are scrutinizing testimony in order to determine whether it has been tainted by its reliance upon traumatic memory or by other problems of witnessing, is Epstein's brand of historical appropriation justifiable? Is it helpful? In light of persistent

Holocaust denial and revisionism, might it be counterproductive? In order to judge, we must first have knowledge of the historical facts.

A review of official Nazi documentation reveals that the Jewish Councils were established so that they might assist the Reich in carrying out its plans for the Jews. They were also cited in Nazi propaganda. One official wrote, “We urgently suggest to hate-mongering foreign journalists, who so often babble about alleged barbaric persecution of the Jews in the German East, to see for themselves, on the spot, the generosity of the German administration in allowing the Jews their own way of life” (Trunk 262).

The Councils were presented in a positive light to the Jews, as well—as vehicles for self-government, modeled on the traditional *kehillas* of Eastern Europe. Still, they were controversial from the outset. Some Jewish community leaders urged resistance to the formation of the Councils, arguing that acquiescence was the equivalent of cooperation with evil. Others, who could not have known the extent of the evil that was to come, argued that temporary cooperation at least might yield a means of providing advocacy and support services for ghetto inmates (Robinson, in Trunk xxxvii-xxxviii).

Ultimately, the Jews had no choice but to cooperate. Inadvertently proving that historical truth is elusive, two renowned historians have provided two differing accounts of the founding of the Lodz Ghetto Judenrat. In Isaiah Trunk’s account, a meeting of the first Lodz Judenrat took place on November 11, 1939. A revolver-wielding Gestapo official was present to intimidate the Council members. The following day twenty of them were summoned to the Gestapo office and arrested; fifteen of them were murdered on the spot (23). In Leonard Tushnet’s account, the Gestapo raided the gathering place of Lodz’s intelligentsia, the Astoria Café, on November 1, 1939. The patrons were arrested, prompting Mordecai Chaim Rumkowski

to present himself at Gestapo headquarters to ask for the Jews' release. There, he was humiliated, seriously beaten, and ejected. On November 10, the four largest synagogues in the town were burned to the ground. The day after that, Rumkowski was ordered to call a meeting of the Judenrat. Uniformed, armed Germans were present; they confiscated all personal documents and arrested all but Rumkowski and his two personal representatives. Those arrested suffered a period of imprisonment and torture, after which twenty-four were shot, one died in prison, and the rest were eventually sent to Krakow, where only two survived (12). That same day an order went out for the establishment of a new Council. It should come as no surprise that the townspeople were hesitant to volunteer; still, a meeting was arranged. The Nazi colonel who addressed the gathering gave a benign presentation bizarrely out of synch with the violence of that morning. Apparently encouraged, Rumkowski, who had been named Eldest of the Jews, requested the release of all those who had been arrested. The colonel offered the release of seven or eight. Rumkowski declined to compromise. The Nazi, predictably, made no concessions (12).

Tushnet points out that after the raid at the Astoria Café, there had been a mass exodus of those who had not yet been harmed. He goes on to note, "Unlike other communal leaders, so anxious to save their skins that they deserted their posts en masse, Rumkowski did not shirk his responsibilities. He made no attempt to flee." He then tempers his praise with the observation that Rumkowski "felt [that] to run away would be an admission of defeat on his part, a giving up of the great chance he had to distinguish himself in the eyes of his fellow-Jews, the only people who mattered to him" (13). In these words Tushnet captures the complexity of Rumkowski's character and motives.

Epstein commemorates the atrocities attendant on the founding of the Lodz Judenrat in *King of the Jews*. His version of events is heavy with dark, dangerous humor. True to historical fact as we know it, Epstein places the upper-class, professional Jews of the town in the Astoria Café—their one remaining diversion. He then lets his imagination take over. On the stage he places Schotter, a comedian, telling timely jokes such as the following:

“Horowitz called on the telephone. That’s not his real name. But his real name also begins with ‘H.’ Horowitz wants to talk to his Governor-General of Poland, to find out what he has done to the Jews. So the governor says, ‘We took away their money, and we’re going to make them work on the canals.’ ‘Not enough,’ Horowitz tells them. Then the governor says, ‘We banned ritual slaughter, and pretty soon they won’t have a potato to eat.’ Still Horowitz isn’t satisfied. *What else?* he wants to know. Then the governor mentions his new ten-point plan. ‘First, we have to set up a Jewish self-help organization—’ ‘That’s it! Stop!’ Horowitz interrupts him. ‘You don’t have to go any further than that!’ (52-53)

“It was a daring joke,” Epstein’s narrator states. “It made one breathless to hear it.”

It is a significant joke, as well. Epstein took it directly from Emmanuel Ringelblum’s *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto* (55). By including jokes circulated by the ghetto inmates, themselves, Epstein deflates his critics’ claims that humor has no place in a Holocaust narrative. The comedian Schotter seems to be based on a man Ringelblum identifies as “Rubenstein, the mad jester” (138). The joke exemplifies a tactic Epstein

uses throughout *King of the Jews*; although the novel most closely follows the story of Rumkowski and the Lodz Ghetto, people and incidents from other ghettos (most notably Warsaw and Vilna) turn up, as well. The joke is most significant in its tacit message that given the opportunity, Jews will destroy themselves and each other. It might be argued that the Jews in the novel proceed to live up to “Horowitz’s” worst expectations.

In the midst of Schotter’s routine, four “Others” enter the room. Epstein never in his novel uses the terms “Nazi” or “S.S.” Nazis are referred to by such terms as “Others,” and “the blond ones,” and members of the S.S. as “Death’s Headers.” (The critic Ellen Schiff [22] has pointed to the irony of calling the Nazis “Others”; it is the Jews who traditionally have been designated as such.) This practice has puzzled and enraged some of his critics. Edith Milton, for example, accuses Epstein of having used “names out of some comic-book Valhalla.” She continues, “By removing the Germans into comic abstraction, Epstein takes them away from serious participation in the action, and lifts their weight from the scale of responsibility. The novel becomes an angry fairy tale, an adolescent fantasy in which the outside world exists dimly, somewhere beyond the forest, and all guilt, all fault, and all control belong to the immediate family. In this case, using these materials, such distortion is an atrocity” (95).

It is worth noting here that fairy-tale elements appear in other works of Holocaust fiction, as well. We might look, for example, to the works of Aharon Appelfeld, which often feature solitary young people, traumatized by war, geographically and psychologically dislocated, wandering the forests and villages of a ravaged Europe. Their connection to family, society, history, and culture has been severed. They may connect temporarily with other marginalized people, but they inevitably separate from them. An eerie unreality hovers over these characters, who,

after all, have witnessed the familiar realistic being displaced by the unimaginable fantastic.

Even Elie Wiesel's *Night* opens with a character who might have come out of a fairy tale or fable—Moshe the Beadle. This simple, pious man is deported but, most implausibly, manages to escape. He heroically returns to warn the others, only to be ignored. We read of a passenger on the deportation train who has visions of the furnaces and flames at Auschwitz before anyone could have known they existed. In possibly the most harrowing scene in the book, small children are tossed into a flaming ditch as in a grotesque reenactment of *Hansel and Gretel*. Throughout this profoundly realistic book there are scenes that seem magical—beyond the scope of normal human experience.

The fairy tale seems to be an ideal genre with which to represent the Holocaust experience. Neither Appelfeld nor Wiesel has been called upon to defend its use in their work. In Appelfeld, especially, it can seem as though “the outside world exists dimly, somewhere beyond the forest.” But it never seems as though “all guilt, all fault, and all control belong to the immediate family.” A thoughtful reading of *King of the Jews* will reveal that although Epstein recognizes flaws in the Jews' response to their predicament, he nevertheless places all guilt, all fault, and all control on the side of the Nazis. Neither Appelfeld nor Wiesel employs humor in his work; it is most likely Epstein's humor—dark and despairing though it is, that has offended critics such as Milton. Both these propositions will be developed below.

Holocaust scholar S. Lillian Kremer suggests that Epstein's “distortion” might be an allusion to Nazideutsch—the perversion of language characteristic of the era, and further observes that “rather than absolving the Germans of guilt, Epstein's parody of

Nazideutsch echoes George Steiner's thesis that there is a straight line from corruption of language to corruption of power; from designating people as vermin to the extermination process" (*Holocaust Literature* 312). She suggests, as well, that Epstein uses these names ironically, and this seems likely. In an interview, Epstein, himself, offers the following explanation:

Some of those terms were actually terms used by the Jews. It was dangerous for them to refer to the Germans and they used these evasions. I thought artistically it made sense. Then there is a private reason which I have mentioned at other times in other interviews. I read an account of the dedication of the Warsaw Ghetto Monument, that pointed out that the mayor of Warsaw, who was going to make the speech dedicating the piece, turned to the Russian General, who was the real power in Warsaw, and said to him, "Watch, I will bet you a hundred groszy that I can make this speech and not once mention the word Jew." So I said to myself, "Watch, I'll write this novel and never mention the word German." But essentially it was an artistic decision. The less of them in this book the better. It didn't make their presence less felt; I think it makes it in a way more felt. (Brownlow 67)

One of the Others who interrupts Schotter's routine on this evening is F. X. Wohltat, a citizen of the town, familiar to the patrons of the café. He has now been put at the head of the Civilian Authority by Germany (referred

to by Epstein as the Occupying Power). He poses as a friend to the Jews, temporarily putting them at ease. One of the men accompanying Wohltat asks the proprietor of the café to step forward. No one moves. Threats ensue. Finally, Herman Putermilch, the owner of the café, steps forward. One of the Others announces that a Judenrat must be formed, to be composed of sixteen of the assembled Jews. Putermilch is named the president and given his first assignment: to draw up a census of all the Jews of the town. This arouses the Jews' suspicions; it is at this point that they are faced with their first moral dilemma. Then, the Jews are told to select the sixteen Judenrat members, with the advice that they should be "those who have the most to offer, the most intelligent, the most resourceful" (56). This arouses the reader's suspicions; it describes exactly the kinds of people an enemy would wish to eliminate first. The Jews are told that they may not leave until the Judenrat has been selected.

Individual Jews come up with excuses with which they hope to save themselves. Then, "like a herd, like steers" (57), the crowd attempts to escape from the back door, which has been locked from the outside. The Jews realize that they are trapped. Putermilch asks for volunteers for the Judenrat, to no avail. Each Jew comes up with reasons why another Jew should serve. Finally, Lipsky, a lawyer who will figure prominently throughout the novel, suggests resistance. "No elections! No Council! No police and no judges! Nothing at all!" he cries. "They are waiting for an answer? Here is our answer: *Do whatever you want to! We can't stop you, but we don't have to cooperate, either. You want to snatch? All right, snatch! You want to kill? So kill. But we will not do this work for you.* Putermilch, it's up to you! Go out there! Don't be

so shy! Tell them: ‘*Sorry, not willing.*’ He concludes with eerie prescience, “‘If not, if we collaborate, if we hold this election, for sure sooner or later our own Elders will end up killing Jews’”(59). The Jews are inspired and ready to resist, until one of them speaks up.

That one is Isaiah Chaim Trumpelman. He characterizes resistance as a luxury, stating his belief that if the Jews, through a Judenrat, had some measure of power, they could manipulate matters to their own advantage. He volunteers to be the Elder of the Judenrat, boasting that he is not afraid to “dirty his hands” (61). (This demonstrates that he is at least aware that he is getting involved in a “dirty” business.) What the reader understands, and what Trumpelman utterly fails to understand, is that the Judenrat will have no power whatsoever other than to add to the misery of the people it will be representing. It will, at times, have the power to forestall that misery, but ultimately, the Jews will live and die at the whim of the Nazis.

The mood shifts, and the people clamor to be on the Council. “‘That’s democracy,’” one of them bitterly points out. “‘All for one and one for all; pretty soon everybody is at everybody’s throat’” (63). Before long they resort to bribery. Trumpelman wins a place on the Council, and he states in his acceptance speech, “‘We have to be the way *they* are. Like bandits. Like wolves’” (66). His words “sent a chill down everyone’s back.” They foreshadow the breaches of compassion and decency that lie ahead. As it turns out, Trumpelman’s place on the Council is soon sold to someone else.

This proves to be his salvation. He storms out of the room and sees a horrific sight:

There, between the gutters, in their underclothes, or wearing no

clothes at all, were the Council of Elders, hopping like frogs over each other's backs. On either side, holding a pistol, stood a Totenkopfer. Laughing. Joking. Puffing a cigarette.

As soon as a Jew had jumped over a Jew he had to drop to the ground, so that the next one could leap over him. They were all doing it, the white shapes of their bodies shining strangely, the sexual parts of the naked men hanging down. (70)

Sixteen shots are heard; the best educated, most successful members of the town's Jewish community have been murdered.

In the historical accounts, there was no stand-up comic telling provocative jokes; neither was there a lethal game of leapfrog. Is Epstein's addition of such scenes defensible? Does it enhance or obscure our understanding of events as they actually unfolded? When considering these questions, we might look back to Chapter 1 of this dissertation and the discussion of the relation of accuracy to authenticity. It was noted that psychiatrist Dori Laub, an authority on trauma and its representation, had concluded that testimony of past trauma can be less than historically accurate while still being authentic and valuable. Michael Bernard-Donals and Richard Glejzer had elaborated, noting that what might be transmitted through such testimony is "something other than knowledge, a radical sense of the event's horror and unreason rather than a reasonable map of the event as history" (12-13). Art, as well, can convey such a sense, thus yielding a different, perhaps deeper understanding of experience—including traumatic experience.

The use of humor in traumatic narrative—in Holocaust narrative, in particular—was also defended in Chapter 1. A number of critics were cited, including Terence Des

Pres, who turned his attention specifically to *King of the Jews*. He begins his discussion by noting the voice of the narrator, which he describes as being civil and decorous in a world where civility and decorum have become alien (222).

Other critics, as well, have focused on the narrator, who “pretends not to understand what he sees” (Goldman 83) and generally reports what he sees without emotion. This lack of affect has aroused controversy and criticism for Epstein. However, by the conclusion of the novel, the reader has deduced that the narrator is one of the child victims grown to adulthood and recounting the story of the Ghetto as he remembers it. This is the equivalent of traumatic testimony—the recounting of an event that, as Cathy Carruth has noted, registers on the witness as a void. The detachment and lack of affect are perfectly consistent with observations of such testimony over the years.

It has been suggested that Epstein’s use of a first-person narrator—especially *this* first-person narrator—distances the reader from the events recounted. All we know of them has been filtered through the narrator’s mind. This distancing blocks the sympathetic identification with the protagonist that is so characteristic of tragedy; very possibly, it opens the way for comedy. The comic devices employed, to be discussed below, further expand the gap that separates the reader from the action (Maltz 80, 105 n. 4).

The narrative voice subtly shifts throughout the novel. The first-person narrator generally uses the third person to recount events, and “while doing so, he gradually, almost imperceptibly, shifts into the voice of an authorial narrator, albeit not an omniscient one” (Maltz 80). These shifts are surely deliberate, used by Epstein to confuse and disorient the reader. “It is as if [Epstein] is attempting to demonstrate that in

treating the subject of the Holocaust the usual literary conventions are not quite applicable and that a new perspective must be devised” (Maltz 80). It is also very possible that Epstein uses this technique to reflect the shifting, unreliable reality of the Holocaust universe.

It has also been noted that although the novel depicts the Holocaust universe, “the reader is immediately plunged into a ‘once upon a time’ ambiance reminiscent of legend or folk-tale” (Schiff 22)—or fairy tale, as noted above. The narrator, although now an adult, recounts events with the naïve voice of a child telling a children’s story. The characters he describes are largely one-dimensional caricatures.

Schiff points out that the innocence of childhood “offers an appropriate metaphor for the response of civilized man to the stupefying barbarities of Hitlerism”(29). It is a metaphor often found in Holocaust literature; Schiff recalls the opening pages of Elie Wiesel’s *Night*. We might also think of the diary of Anne Frank, who responded with innocence and hopefulness to the arbitrariness and cruelty of her predicament. Epstein understands that in childhood, we are often confronted with a reality that defies understanding; he understands, too, that the reality of the Holocaust is similarly unfathomable.

Yet Des Pres has written that the narrator, rather than distancing us from events, invites us into the community in which they took place. Des Pres stresses the importance of community in *King of the Jews*, noting that the behavior of the inhabitants of the ghetto, no matter how “bizarre” and “frenetic,” is almost always shared. He specifically cites the joke quoted above, in which a local comedian imagines “Horowitz” expressing delight at the prospect of a Jewish self-help organization, as “the property of the ghetto community”; through it, the community can both laugh at itself and absorb a very real

threat together (222).

Des Pres characterizes the goings-on at the ghetto as “a comic spectacle that is larger than life,” and he quite appropriately notes that they “take their gross size and shape from the kind of folk or communal laughter that Mikhail Bakhtin, in his book on Rabelais, called ‘carnavalesque.’” (222). In fact, one would be hard pressed to come up with a better example of carnival laughter than the laughter to be found in *King of the Jews*. As noted in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, carnival laughter—irreverent and rebellious—breaks up official lies and allows hope to replace fear. Des Pres finds, in *King of the Jews*, “the spectacle of life defending itself” (222). Food and sex, the life-giving elements that figure so prominently in carnival laughter, appear in abundance in the novel. The “lower” forms of humor—jokes, puns, slapstick, and clowning—that characterize carnival laughter fill the pages of *King of the Jews*.

Des Pres addresses the scene described above in which the Judenrat is established, stressing that during the Holocaust, the most basic moral and ethical norms were subverted. Official policy promoted death; the promotion of life was unofficial, underground. In between stood what Des Pres refers to as the no-man’s land of the Judenrat. The Judenrat, led by its Elder, had to maintain some semblance of normal life for the ghetto inmates while accommodating an administration bent on taking life. Its position was ambiguous, illogical, impossible, and Epstein understands this. He writes the scene with a combination of high drama and manic comedy. Des Pres claims that the S.S. did sometimes force Jews into humiliating, deadly games (though not necessarily at the founding of the Lodz Ghetto Judenrat), and he notes that this would seem to rule out any response to this scene other than profound lament. Yet he continues, “What can lament, or any mode of high seriousness, do with behavior so bizarre? Vigorous ambivalence is

perhaps a better, more capable response in cases so appalling and funny at once, a kind of ambivalence that is the especial domain of carnival laughter” (225).

Another carnivalesque event portrayed in *King of the Jews* is the wedding of Trumpelman to Miss Phelia Lubliver. (Des Pres points out the “zany” names created by Epstein, stating that this gives each character a communal as well as a private identity [222].) This wedding is based on the wedding of Rumkowski to Dora Weinberger on December 27, 1941. Leonard Tushnet describes Weinberger as “a thirty-year-old lawyer who had been accredited to the Lodz Municipal Court” (36). By contrast, Epstein paints Lubliver as barely functional and morally compromised. Holocaust scholar S. Lillian Kremer suggests that Epstein, in his fiction, distorted the historical figure of the bride in order to further demean the Trumpelman character (*Holocaust* 312). Tushnet writes, “The reception that followed the nuptials was sumptuous in the eyes of the hungry ghetto populace. The favored guests were served with fish, roast meat, compote, six pies, other sweets, brandy, wine, and liqueurs” (37). Epstein writes, “Delicious smells, maddening smells—from real soups, from yellow butter—drifted up from the banquet tables at the back of the church. While they were waiting, the Jews tried to think of something else” (128).

We learn, in Epstein’s fictional account, that “there was even a rumor that the Big Man would appear” (122). We also learn that the Judenrat had taken to presenting couples with gifts of food—a pot of honey or a double ration of bread—upon marrying, causing a rash of weddings in the ghetto. Epstein reports, “Jews who hardly knew each other got engaged” (122). He adds that the weddings provided the Jews with a cause for optimism, which did not always serve them well, for “even the most disturbing news was seen in a favorable light. When the patients were suddenly removed from the hospital,

when the prisoners disappeared from the Tsarnecka Street jail, everyone accepted the explanation that the former were being transported to rest homes, the latter to work on the unfinished dikes. Then all the clothes came back, but not the people inside them” (122-23).

In Epstein’s version of the wedding, the Big Man, though not in attendance, is rumored to have sent an extravagant gift; the King of Bulgaria and the Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann send their regrets. One invited guest who does show up is Adam Czerniakow, head of the Judenrat at the Warsaw Ghetto, “king of hundreds of thousands of Jews” (127).

Schotter, the comedian, entertains the crowd with a joke:

“. . . not long ago I met a wise man, a real sage,
and he told me that there wasn’t a doubt that
Horowitz was going to die on a Jewish holiday. . . .
Naturally, I wanted to know how he could make
such a prediction. Where did he get his information?
“Any day that Horowitz dies,” the wise man told me,
“will be a Jewish holiday.” (128)

This is another example of authentic Holocaust humor; a version of it appears in Steve Lipman’s *Laughter in Hell* (201-02).

The ceremony begins, and the bride “took a step, and then another. Because of the shawl over her head she could not see where she was going” (128). Then, however, the comedy turns from slapstick to dark. One of the Others enters and announces the Big Man’s wedding gift, which amounts to the first deportation action. All the Jews of Poland, and eventually all Jews everywhere, are to be resettled on Madagascar, where

they will “live in peace and security.” Trumpelman clearly had expected this announcement, and he proceeds to praise Madagascar as a “paradise.” He promises, “we shall build a kingdom there to last a thousand years,” which Kremer recognizes as “a grotesque parody of the German dream of a thousand-year Reich” (*Witness* 120). In the climax to the scene, Lipsky rushes the altar and fires a shot, shouting, “Trumpelman! You’re no Elder! You’re a traitor to the Jews!” (121). The bullet hits one of the guests; Trumpelman survives, enraged at having been betrayed. In Tushnet’s account of the Rumkowski wedding, “a few coarse May-December jokes were cracked at Rumkowski’s expense. He got angry, lost his temper, and threatened the jokesters with transportation to labor camps” (37).

The wedding scene is a prime example of carnival humor. It features what Bakhtin refers to as “the folk” in attendance at an event that could be looked upon as part of “low” culture. There is the characteristic emphasis on food and sex. Yet carnival humor is, as Bakhtin recognizes, revolutionary; this is problematic within the context of *King of the Jews*. There was no possibility of meaningful revolution within the ghetto. Rebellious impulses toward the Others had no outlet. For many inmates, they were directed toward the Elder, instead. Any laughter within this scene is more desperate than hopeful.

The scene exemplifies black humor, as well. Celebration and horror exist side by side. The terrifying coexists with comedy, and the comedy incorporates parody, burlesque, and exaggeration. The gap between the ideal of a joyous wedding and the reality of this travesty seems unbridgeable, bringing the scene into the realm of the grotesque. Humor theorist Patrick O’Neill has said that “the grotesque points to the inhuman and the abyss” (78), and that is exactly the direction in which the ghetto inmates

are pointed.

In the next chapter of *King of the Jews*, “The Five Day Strike,” Epstein commemorates the strikes and leftist opposition that took place at the Lodz Ghetto, supplementing them with events that occurred at Vilna and Warsaw (Kremer, *Witness* 118). He attributes to Trumpelman the reasoning that had driven Rumkowski—which was that since the Jews had no hope of mounting a meaningful resistance, their best hope was to prove themselves indispensable to the German war economy through their work. Yet starvation, disease, and exhaustion take their toll on the inmates’ morale. Attempting to assure the ghetto’s survival, Trumpelman becomes increasingly dictatorial, and the inmates become increasingly rebellious. His edicts seem to them to be unnecessarily cruel. They engage in acts of sabotage, which he quickly recognizes and punishes. The greatest discontent is voiced by the Bundists and Bolsheviks among the inmates, who understand that their labors, while keeping them alive, are also providing aid and comfort to their enemies. Eventually, they call for a strike, and the rest of the inmates join them. Trumpelman, feeling threatened, responds by cracking down even harder. At times, he and his wife appear to be in collaboration with the Others, going so far as to threaten the ghetto inmates with starvation or with having their names added to the resettlement lists if they do not return to work. The Jewish police become involved, as do the Others. Alliances are forged and broken. There are threats, deceptions, and betrayals. Matters continue to escalate in this heartbreaking spectacle of Jew against Jew. In the end, predictably, nothing has been gained; there is only loss and defeat.

Surely, there is not much in the way of conventional humor in this episode.

Kremer notes that “here, the novelist abandons the ironic tone and adopts an objective, reportorial voice” (*Witness* 119). Still, Des Pres continues to maintain that the episode exemplifies carnival humor in that the inmates are gripped by “‘an irresistible force,’ which is the power of imagination summoning the power of life in its collective thrust, a force magnified by the community acting as a whole” (226).

The Judenrats and their Elders were continually faced with impossible challenges, but none was more impossible than the selection of inmates for deportation. How they reacted to this challenge has largely determined how history has viewed them. This issue fits within the larger question of Jewish resistance—a question that has sparked much controversy and caused much pain. Esteemed Holocaust historian Raul Hilberg has written that “the reaction pattern of the Jews is characterized by almost complete lack of resistance.” He attributes this to their experience of some two thousand years in exile, stating that the Jewish reaction was characterized by two principal features: “an attempt to avert action and, failing that, automatic compliance with orders. . . . They avoided ‘provocations’ and complied instantly with decrees and orders.” They hoped that the Germans eventually would tire of persecuting them. “This hope,” suggests Hilberg, “was founded on a two-thousand-year-old experience. In exile the Jews . . . had learned that they could avert danger and survive destruction by placating and appeasing their enemies. . . . Thus, over a period of centuries the Jews had learned that in order to survive they had to refrain from resistance” (Hilberg 666; qtd. in Trunk x).

Turning his attention to the Judenrats, Hilberg notes their role under Nazi rule:

The transmission of German directives and orders
to the Jewish population, the use of Jewish police
to enforce German will, the deliverance of Jewish property,

Jewish labor, and Jewish lives to the German enemy. The Jewish councils, in the exercise of their historic function, continued until the end to make desperate attempts to alleviate the suffering and to stop the mass dying in the ghettos. But at the same time the council responded to German demands with automatic compliance and invoked German authority to compel the community's obedience. Thus the Jewish leadership both saved and destroyed its people—saving some Jews and destroying others, saving the Jews at one moment and destroying them at the next. Some leaders broke under this power; others became intoxicated with it. (666; qtd. in Trunk x)

Yet Hilberg reserves his harshest judgment for the Elders of the Judenrats:

With the growth of the destructive function of the Judenrate, many Jewish leaders felt an almost irresistible urge to look like their German masters.

In March, 1940, a Nazi observer in Krakow was struck by the contrast between the poverty and filth of the Jewish quarter and the businesslike luxury of the Jewish community headquarters, which was filled with beautiful charts, comfortable leather chairs, and heavy carpets. In Warsaw the Jewish oligarchy took to wearing boots. In Lodz the ghetto "dictator" Rumkowski printed postage stamps bearing his likeness and made speeches which contained expressions such as "my children," "my factories," and "my Jews." From the inside, then, it seemed already quite clear that the

Jewish leaders had become rulers, reigning and disposing over the ghetto community with a finality that was absolute.

(146; qtd. in Trunk xi)

These sentiments reappear later, in 1963, in Hannah Arendt's reporting for *The New Yorker* on the Eichmann Trial. Her writings were collected and somewhat revised in the controversial book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. She writes that the Jewish Councils

were informed by Eichmann or his men of how many Jews were needed to fill each train, and they made out the list of deportees. The Jews registered, filled out innumerable forms, answered pages and pages of questionnaires regarding their property so that it could be seized the more easily; they then assembled at the collection points and boarded the trains. The few who tried to hide or escape were rounded up by a special Jewish police force. As far as Eichmann could see, no one protested, no one refused to cooperate. (115).

She continues:

Of course, [Eichmann] did not expect the Jews to share the general enthusiasm over their destruction, but he did expect more than compliance, he expected—and received, to a truly extraordinary degree—their cooperation. (117)

Such statements are troubling; some might call them outrageous. They lead us to recall Primo Levi's exhortation not to judge the victims of the Holocaust. Isaiah

Trunk, who was Chief Archivist at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, is somewhat more forgiving than Arendt or Hilberg. Trunk divides the history of the Councils into two periods: before the deportation actions and after. Compliance with requests for Jewish property and Jewish labor is defensible, Trunk feels. The Councils were striving to prolong the existence of the ghettos by making them useful to the Germans. With the advent of requests for inmates to deport to the East, however, “cooperation . . . reached the morally dangerous borderline of collaboration” (Trunk 570). Trunk stresses that each Elder reacted in his own way to this dilemma. Some, like Rumkowski, continued to enforce cooperation. Others, like Adam Czerniakow, fell into despair and resorted to suicide. Still others followed their families and neighbors into the gas chambers. A few took what Trunk calls “the perilous path of resistance” (571).

Trunk concludes that cooperation with the Germans was unavoidable for the Councils, stating that “the very rationale for their existence would have vanished without it” (572). He emphasizes that cooperation was forced upon the Councils and maintained through stark terror. He also acknowledges that there were certain “spineless” council members who cooperated under the illusion that they were protecting their own interests. He comments, “In an atmosphere of moral nihilism, corruption of Nazi officialdom, and inhuman terror, it was not easy for such Council members to be on guard against crossing the fine demarcation line between cooperation and collaboration. Compelled to adjust themselves to the mentality of their German bosses, some of the Council members were disposed to adopt their methods. They were often forced to do so” (573). Finally, he states that “There were also Councilmen with a compulsive urge to rule, and participation in the Councils

provided them with the opportunity of relieving their lust for authority and honor; for this they felt obligated to the Germans” (573). Since the Middle Ages, Jews had not had such authority to regulate their own economic, administrative, judicial, and police functions; sadly, the authority they had now was a sham. Trunk sums up the tragedy of the Councils by noting that “for the first time in Jewish history a Jewish organ was forced to help a foreign, criminal regime to destroy coreligionists” (574).

There were, however, instances of Jewish resistance, and Epstein does not fail to write scenes of resistance into his book. The children—overwhelmingly orphans—show particular compassion and courage. They risk their lives to smuggle food into the Ghetto for its starving inmates. At Lodz, Rumkowski had maintained power largely by controlling the Ghetto food supply. This engendered resentment, growing into rage, among the Ghetto inmates. In a journal that circulated privately appeared a poem, “The Ration”:

We have to go to Rumkowski’s house,
 “We’re hungry,” we have to yell.
 We won’t shut up for him.
 We can’t shut up for him.
 Knock out all his windows!
 The ration cards have little worth,
 Here we live in hell on earth. (Tushnet 33)

Smuggling was a direct threat to Rumkowski’s power, and he did all he could to stop it. This included the establishment of a special ghetto currency. It was the only currency of value within the Ghetto; yet it was worthless outside of the Ghetto, so it could not be used to pay for food that needed to be brought in. Trumpelman does the

same thing in *King of the Jews*.

In a scene replete with slapstick comedy, Epstein portrays a group of orphans undertaking a daring mission. They learn that there are children at a clinic within the Ghetto who are starving, and they determine to provide them with milk by appropriating Trumelman's cow, "The Trumelman Holstein." They muffle the sound of her hooves by putting thick woolen socks on her. Their plan is to hide her inside the Ghetto's horse-drawn funeral wagon. One of the orphans is so excited over this plan that he accidentally hits the cow behind the ear. "Her tail flew up, as if there were a mechanical connection between the two parts" (90). Another orphan, however, is troubled at the prospect of stealing from someone who has protected them. Ultimately, they decide that the end justifies the means.

They make their way to the spot where one of the Ghetto's now frequent funerals is being held. They bring the cow up to the ramp leading into the wagon, but she refuses to budge. Meanwhile, the funeral service has ended, and the widow of the deceased dabs at her eyes with her red handkerchief. This excites the cow, who charges the widow and ends up toppling into the grave. "'Moooo!' went the beast, in an international tongue" (95). The widow faints, and the frightened horses bolt with the wagon. The wagon soon comes to a halt, but no one knows how to get the cow out of the grave. Each Jew present has an opinion. Both horses are hitched to the cow, but each horse takes off in a different direction, almost strangling the cow. One of the funeral guests, a physicist, comes up with a successful plan to retrieve the cow.

The orphans load the cow into the wagon, cover her up, and approach the gates of the building where the clinic is housed. The building is guarded, and just as the guards are about to let the party through, a sneeze is heard from inside the wagon.

As luck would have it, Trumpleman arrives at the scene. One of the orphans confesses to the “crime,” qualifying it by crying, “But it’s milk for babies!” This is followed by a loud “*Moooo!*” from the cow. Trumpelman strikes each boy on the face, and continues his beatings (100).

Here, again, we see a life-promoting plan subverted. By creating a scene in which absurdity reigns, Epstein perfectly captures the absurdity that regularly reigned during the Holocaust. Once again, we are presented with a situation that is so bizarre that lamentation doesn’t seem like quite the right response to it; laughter through tears might seem more suitable.

This scene brings the idealistic, courageous children into sharp contrast with the corrupt, self-serving officials of the Ghetto. By writing it, Epstein has commemorated “the activities of Jewish children throughout Europe, who slipped through sewers and ghetto walls risking death to bring food into the ghettos” (Kremer, *Witness* 117).

Our attention now will shift from the behavior of the Councils to that of the Elders—most especially of Mordecai Chaim Rumkowski. Holocaust scholar Leonard Tushnet, in *The Pavement of Hell*, chronicles the governance of three of the most prominent Elders: Adam Czerniakow of Warsaw, Jacob Gens of Vilna, and Rumkowski. Tushnet characterizes Rumkowski as confident, ambitious, and aggressive when promoting his projects. He was also a generous philanthropist, focusing his attention largely on organizations that advocated for children. He was the general supervisor of several orphan asylums in Lodz. A prodigious fundraiser, he was able to construct a new, modern facility in the suburbs of Lodz. Under the guidance of the renowned Janusz Korczak, he made it the most respected orphanage

in all of Poland (Tushnet 6). By contrast, Epstein's Trumpelman "attains the directorship of the Hatters' Asylum [the ghetto orphanage] by chance and administers it by whim" (Kremer, *Witness* 107). As capable as Rumkowski was, the administration of his orphanages often seemed harsh and arbitrary; he was known to alienate his staff frequently. Epstein creates Trumpelman in the same mold.

Rumkowski had been an insurance agent, though Tushnet gives no indication that he had committed fraud. Epstein also makes Trumpelman a doctor—with extremely dubious credentials; Rumkowski was not a doctor, nor did he pose as one. Power did not corrupt Trumpelman; he was corrupt before having assumed any.

Epstein imagines a background for Trumpelman very different from Rumkowski's. The historical Rumkowski and the fictional Trumpelman overlap in some respects and diverge in others, and Epstein needed to invent a background for Trumpelman that would account for his particular character and motivation.

Rumkowski had a substantial record of community service and political activism. He had been vice president of the kehilla at Lodz, responsible for overseeing philanthropic organizations, licensing ritual officials, and organizing Jewish schools. He had tried to counter Polish anti-Semitism through accommodation, and when that had failed, he had turned to Zionism. Trumpelman, on the other hand, is apolitical until the establishment of the ghetto, and he engages in "spontaneous heroism rather than disciplined political action" (Kremer, *Holocaust* 312). Epstein stresses his egocentricism, rendering him opportunistic and unethical. Tushnet makes a point of Rumkowski's integrity. Both, in the end, were victims—of cruel oppressors as well as their own vanity and gullibility.

Trumpelman is motivated by a desire for adulation as well as by concern for

his people, and the same had been true of Rumkowski. Both put their likenesses on the postage stamps and currency of the Ghettos. Both drove about in horse-drawn carriages. Rumkowski had ordered the publication of the *Ghetto-Zeitung*—essentially his personal propaganda sheet. In it typically appeared poems such as the following:

Our President, Herr Rumkowski,
 Besides his brains and talents
 Is blessed by Heaven
 With a firm, strong hand . . .
 In the factories, in the offices,
 All base elements are now put away.
 Order reigns in the ghetto
 Thanks to his firm, strong hand. (Tushnet 35)

Because of Epstein's exaggerated portrayal of Trumpelman's weaknesses, his concern for his people seems far less genuine.

As Rumkowski had, Trumpelman concludes that accommodating to the Germans is the surest means of achieving his goals. Over time, he seems to develop an insidious identification with Hitler, offering at one point to call him on the telephone and speak to him "as one head of state to another" (113). He plans to invite Hitler to inspect the ghetto, offering the delusional boast, "When he sees what my Jews can do, we can discuss the role Trumpelman will play after the war" (113). Eventually, the distinction between Hitler and Trumpelman becomes obscured in the minds of the ghetto inmates, as well, and the term "my Jews" becomes increasingly offensive to them.

When the deportation orders came, all illusions fell away, for the Elders and

for the other inmates, as well. They came, for Rumkowski, in January 1942. He was ordered to select 20,000 Jews for “resettlement elsewhere.” He was told that the purpose of the deportations was to eliminate the “unemployables”; this strengthened his rationalization that the Lodz Ghetto was to be a permanent source of labor for the Germans. He was unaware of the death camp at Chelmno; still, he was aware that “elsewhere” would be a place that few would be able to survive. He despaired over how to handle his task—over whether to reveal or conceal what he knew. Helpless against the Germans, he lashed out at his own people, blaming them for not having worked hard enough to appease their oppressors (Tushnet 45-46).

He sought and got advice from a variety of sources. The Rabbinical Council, however, offered none, stating that it was “not their responsibility” (Tushnet 46). In *King of the Jews* we find the rabbis, before the arrival of the deportation orders, falling back on their Talmudic training to predict an imminent end to the war. Epstein writes, perhaps sardonically, “This is how such true believers reckoned: the new Hebrew year, which fell in November, would be 5702; and was not 5702 the numerical value of the Hebrew phrase *The Sabbath Brings with It Peace?*” The Ghetto inmates are encouraged by Russia’s entrance into the war. They gather in groups; the comedian Schotter tells jokes. Meanwhile, there is an unprecedented infestation of flies in the Ghetto.

One evening Death’s Header Wohltat appears at one of the gatherings and demands a list with the names of 100 Jews for deportation the next day. “It will be like a vacation,” he assures them (179). A woman asks what would happen if they refused to select deportees. “Then we’ll do it,” Wohltat replies. A man cries, “It’s a scandal for Jews to put down the names of Jews!” S. Lillian Kremer notes, “As the

dilemma becomes more painful for the *Judenrat*, there is a decided shift in tone from Jewish compassion to Nazi diction advocating the expendability of ‘anti-social elements’—jail inmates, like those taken previously, rather than productive workers. In a *Nazideutsch*, self-deceptive parody, an unnamed victim argues, ‘we look at things this way. Not who should go but who should stay. The biologically sound material. The socially valuable elements.’” (*Witness* 121-22). Descending farther down the moral continuum, the Jews attempt to bribe and bargain with Wohltat; they delude themselves into thinking that they have power and are getting meaningful concessions.

Ultimately, the Jews realize that they are faced with a profound moral and ethical dilemma. They argue over whether it is justifiable to sacrifice a few in order to save many. One suggests appealing to world opinion; contemporary readers know what she could not have known—that the world was mostly indifferent. Another suggests selecting names at random in order to absolve themselves from responsibility and guilt. A particularly thoughtful man asks, ““Why does the Conqueror wish us to become his accomplices in this matter? . . . It can only be because he is going to commit a crime so big that even he dares not do it alone”” (189). He advocates setting the Ghetto on fire and fleeing.

The Ghetto rabbis appear; they obviously have been beaten and abused. The Jews ask the rabbis to help them solve their dilemma. One advises, ““Nothing could be more simple. . . . It is written, *The Law Is the Law*. Draw up the list of names.”” One of the most esteemed proclaims, ““If the whole may be saved by the loss of the part, then the lesser evil must be done.”” Another suggests that those selected would be privileged, ““Chosen to sanctify God’s Holy Name.”” Finally, one states, ““My

fellow scholars have overlooked the words of the mighty Rambam: *If heathens say to the Israelites, "Surrender one of your number to us, that we may put him to death, otherwise we will put all of you to death," they should all suffer death rather than surrender a single Israelite to them.* Thus wrote Maimonides.” (193). Another quotes a similar opinion from the Jerusalem Talmud.

Then one of the rabbis thinks of a Talmudic passage that modifies the last two opinions. Soon the discussion is displaying the kind of excessive intellectualism parodied in so much Jewish humor. Eventually, one rabbi concludes, “We have to kill each other and the last person alive has to kill himself” (197). Epstein then writes a scene of matchless black humor in which the Jews attempt to outdo each other by making up and trying various preposterous methods of suicide. It is a daring coupling of horror and humor. Yet in this outrageous, absurd situation, the Jews’ actions make perfect sense. What could have been an appropriate, correct response to their dilemma?

Kremer claims that in writing this scene, Epstein used lines and details from reports by Tushnet and another Holocaust historian, Gerald Reitlinger, of an exchange between Jacob Gens, Elder of the Vilna Ghetto, and his Judenrat. “However,” she continues, “he so embellishes the exchange that much of its tragic tone is reduced to posturing” (*Witness* 122). She points to the Talmudic exchanges among the rabbis and comments that Epstein “diminishes through farce what would otherwise have been a sustained, solemn scene of moral significance. Both because of the futility of the rabbinic mission and Epstein’s satiric tone, this scene fails to sustain its early tragic dimension” (*Witness* 122). She is particularly offended by the portrayal of the rabbis. She adds that “the tonal problem results from the introduction of a set of

extraneous arguments, which cloud and detract from the selection issue by drawing attention to their own facile ingenuity” (*Witness* 113). She concludes her criticism of Epstein by offering, “Perhaps Epstein succumbs to farce in this sequence because he is more sympathetic to secular rather than religious Jewish leaders, and by his regard for Hannah Arendt’s thesis that the vastness of Jewish losses is attributable to the cooperation of the Jewish leadership” (*Witness* 123).

The scene that Epstein recreates here is a perfect reflection of the distorted reality created by the Holocaust. As such, it is a perfect example of a scene that begs to be treated with dark humor. Arguably, this is the only mode capable of capturing its absurdity and horror. The gap between the ideal of a predictable and just world and the reality of the arbitrary, cruel world of the Holocaust appears unbridgeable here. It is, in fact, so wide that the scene’s black humor spills over into the realm of the grotesque.

Kremer, like many other critics to be discussed below, seems to have bought into Des Pres’s “fictions” of Holocaust representation—particularly the third fiction, which holds that the Holocaust must be approached as a solemn or sacred event always requiring an equally solemn treatment. She accuses Epstein of compromising the “tragic” elements of the scene. Yet as noted in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, tragedy accepts and affirms the actual world while comedy mocks it. Comedy, Des Pres wrote, “deflates or even cancels the authority of its object,” so that “a comic response to calamity is often more resilient, more effectively equal to terror and the sources of terror than a response that is solemn or tragic” (220). In other words, far from trivializing the horror of deportation, Epstein has confronted and challenged it.

Yet there is some horror that defies any response. An order came from the

Germans for the deportation of 20,000—to be made up of all children under the age of ten and all adults over sixty-five, in addition to anyone else unemployed or unemployable. The ghetto inmates blamed Rumkowski for this, since he had done such a fine job of persuading the Germans that Jewish labor was necessary to sustaining their war economy; apparently, the Germans had decided that any Jew who could not provide that labor was expendable (Tushnet 52). Rumkowski's response, remembered as the "Give Me Your Children" speech, follows:

The ghetto has received a hard blow. They ask of us the best we have—children and old people. I never had the luck to have a child of my own and so I gave up the best years of my life to children. . . . In my old age I must stretch out my hands and beg, "Brothers and sisters, give them to me! Fathers and mothers, give me your children!"

Yesterday I received an order to send some 21,000 Jews out of the ghetto. "If you don't do it, we will." And the question arose, "Should we do it or leave it to others?" Even more important is the question of not how many will we lose but of how many we can save? We all, myself and my closest associates, have come to the conclusion that despite the horrible responsibility, we have to accept the evil order. I have to perform this bloody operation myself; I have to cut off limbs to save the body! I have to take away the children, because otherwise others will be taken, God forbid! . . . Look at me! My whole life was bound up with the welfare of children and the care of the sick, and now

I can't even help my own relatives! . . . I tried to save the nine-year-olds at least, but they say no . . . We have in the ghetto many people sick with tuberculosis whose lives are numbered in weeks, perhaps in days. I do not know—perhaps this is a fiendish idea, and perhaps it is not—but I can't help mentioning it. Deliver to me those sick people and maybe I'll be able to save the healthy . . .

It's better to get rid of those with only days or weeks to live than to send out healthy people who earn us the bread we need. Those others don't get better and we get sick. . . . We'll feed the swine with the sick. . . . I stand before you a broken-down Jew. Don't envy me. This is the worst task I've ever undertaken. I stretch out my weak, trembling hands to you, and I plead—give me those victims to forestall their demand for more victims, to save a hundred thousand Jews. . . . That's what they told me—give up the victims yourselves, and all will be peaceful once more. (Tushnet 52-53)

Tushnet reports that Rumkowski was interrupted by wailing and cries of “‘We'll all go!’” and “‘Mr. President! Exempt one-child families and take only from those with several children.’” This angered Rumkowski, who shouted,

That's all idle talk. I have no strength to enter into debates with you! If some German official came, you wouldn't cry out! I begged yesterday on my knees to no avail! Just remember—from the villages of seven and eight thousand Jews, barely a thousand came here, so what's better? What do you want? Eighty or ninety thousand Jews left behind, or all wiped

out? Condemn whom you will, only save the remaining Jews.

I'm not talking to hotheads. I appeal to your understanding and common sense. I've done everything and I'll do everything to prevent guns from being used in the ghetto and to keep blood from being spilled. We can't go against the order, only lighten its execution. Do you think the Germans will be so gentle and kind if they carry out the order themselves? (Tushnet 53)

Epstein does not attempt the representation of this scene. In an essay published in 1988, he refers to a review he had written approximately ten years prior to that date, in which he had admitted, "I have come, finally and reluctantly, to the conclusion that almost any honest eye-witness testimony of the Holocaust is more moving and more successful at creating a sense of what it must have been like in the ghettos and the camps than *almost* any fictional account of the same events" (*Writing* 261). He goes on, in the 1988 essay, to modify his former stance. Still, his words make us consider the possibility that there is some evil that is bigger than our capacity to comprehend or represent it. And what kind of representation would be appropriate or necessary? As noted in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, even in so extreme a form of black humor as the grotesque there must be a balance between comedy and horror; without that balance we are left with only unadulterated horror. The thought of parents voluntarily handing over their small children for deportation and extermination is as close to unadulterated horror as any thought could be.

Epstein does, however, bring us face to face with horror in the chapter entitled "The Yellow Bus," in which one of the ghetto children follows a deportation train and witnesses the extermination of former fellow-inmates in a mobile killing unit. Such

atrocities happened regularly during the Holocaust, but the particular scene Epstein presents us with here is entirely fictional. Perhaps that allowed him to trust his imagination. In any case, he abandons any attempts at humor here. As Des Pres has noted, this is the only scene in the book in which the action is carried out by one solitary individual; the community is absent, and so, therefore, is any opportunity for carnival laughter (224). Epstein's tone shifts, as well. Kremer suggests that "in Hemingwayesque, reportorial prose, Epstein renders the slaughter with German precision rather than Jewish emotion" (126). Lipiczany, the child witness, progresses from trauma-induced denial to grim acceptance.

We return, now, to the question of historical appropriation that opened this chapter. Certainly, Epstein's use of historical detail—such as the workings of the Judenrat—lends authenticity to his novel. So, too, does his inclusion of documentary evidence from such sources as Ringelblum, Tushnet, Trunk, Reitlinger, and Arendt (Kremer, *Holocaust* 312). It even can be, and has been, argued by some critics that his manipulation of history for heightened effect is justifiable.

Other critics, however, are not convinced. It is Epstein's ironic, irreverent treatment of history that has offended them the most. Dorothy Rabinowitz, for example, asks, "Does it matter that Mr. Epstein has appropriated the torments of real Jews and applied them to fictional characters of such a sort as to make those torments seem little more than just deserts? It does, just as it matters that Mr. Epstein distorts ghetto culture and history at will, . . . It matters to history (not least because readers unacquainted with the facts cannot know where truth leaves off and fiction begins) and it matters to Mr. Epstein's art" (24). It is noteworthy that this article appeared in 1979—just as the Holocaust was emerging as a subject in the mainstream media. By

now, it would be hard to find someone who does not know where truth leaves off and fiction begins.

That notwithstanding, Rabinowitz, along with numerous other critics, is guilty of buying into Des Pres's second fiction of Holocaust representation: "Representations of the Holocaust shall be as accurate and faithful as possible to the facts and conditions of the event, without change or manipulation for any reason—artistic reasons included" (217). She fails to consider the possibility that fiction that aims to adhere rigidly to the facts "never quite succeeds, never feels complete," as Des Pres has suggested. This is especially true when the facts are so bizarre that they strain credulity. Geoffrey Hartman, too, suggests that unrealistic representations of the Holocaust might be preferable, since realistic representations evoke a sense of horror so great that we are unable to contextualize the information offered and make sense of it. As noted in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, he writes that since the Holocaust was such a breach in reality and history, "the very rule of probability has suffered a shock, a rule that cannot be relinquished without giving up art's crucial link to verisimilitude: to a mimetic and narratable dimension" (329). Thus, paradoxically, we might achieve a greater, deeper understanding of a traumatic historical event when the facts have been manipulated through art.

Epstein has addressed this issue head-on, stating that "the goal (altogether illusory) of history is, of course, the determination of facts. Imagination, . . . is an anathema to the historian. So too is the exercise of humor and irony and personality and point of view." He continues by observing that neither historical, liturgical, nor fictional accounts can reproduce or recreate the Holocaust experience "in such a way that the reader feels a sense of connectedness, not dispassion and distance, least of all

horror and repugnance, to the events and the characters that, Lazarus-like, are called back from the dead.” He concludes this thought by stating, “I would go so far as to say that while the historians and rabbis surely seek, and often find, meaning and understanding, they cannot instill the peculiar sense of responsibility that the novelist can—the sort of responsibility for creation that might alone . . . bring about the kind of political change that would make another Holocaust less certain, more unlikely” (“Writing about” 264-65).

He then expresses his concern over our inability to process the reality of the Holocaust—a reality “in which the world as we know it is hardly recognizable and literature as we have always experienced it can have nothing to say” (265). His concern is that this has encouraged the emergence of a kind of fiction (he cites *The Painted Bird*, specifically) that makes a feeling of connectedness on the part of the reader difficult, if not impossible. He goes on to make two interesting points. His first is that fiction that is excessively fantastic and gruesome ends up reflecting the culture of the oppressor—“the very ‘Blood and *Kitsch*’ that so marked the culture of the Third Reich.” His second is that in representing the Holocaust as a unique event outside of history, such fiction “diminishes our ability to see and to feel and to think.” He concludes, eloquently, “What is being denied is the one crucial fact: that those who suffered, and those who inflicted suffering, were men, and that the Holocaust did not occur in a fantasyland, or outside of history, or in a ‘univers concentrationnaire,’ but in the only world we can hope to know, the only one we can experience and be responsible for—our own” (266-67).

We may view *King of the Jews* as Freud might have viewed it—as one long tendentious joke. But who is the butt of the joke? Some critics, such as Edith Milton,

quoted above, fear that the Jewish People may be—that Epstein has confused the victims with the perpetrators. Any judgment of Epstein’s intentions must rest on his portrayal of Trumpelman. Kremer has observed that with regard to Trumpelman, “Epstein is caught between sharply polarized feelings” (*Witness* 105), which is perfectly appropriate for a subject so complex and provocative. Kremer quite correctly recognizes the impossible situation Trumpelman faces. She concludes that “Epstein’s judgment against Trumpelman lies in three major areas: his self-delusion; his exultation in dictatorial power (illustrated in the issue of ghetto currency and postage bearing his likeness); and, most tragically, in his betrayal of Jews through compliance with Nazi ‘resettlement’ orders” (*Witness* 106).

Trumpelman’s “self-delusion” is both understandable and forgivable given the fact that the reality he faced was unfathomable and unbearable. We may look upon it as a necessary defense mechanism—one that was employed by countless other Holocaust victims. His “betrayal” of his people was not a personal choice. Epstein makes it clear that compliance with Nazi orders was forced upon him and that it was highly traumatic for him. His “exultation in dictatorial power” was a serious flaw, and Epstein does not attempt to mitigate it. Trumpelman was, after all, a prisoner in his own Ghetto, and we would do well to remember Primo Levi’s observation, noted in Chapter 3 of this dissertation, that “it is illogical to demand—and rhetorical and false to maintain—that [the prisoners] all and always followed the behavior expected of saints and stoic philosophers” (49). Epstein portrays Trumpelman as no more than a man—one capable of acting heroically at some moments, contemptibly at others. Ultimately, a careful reading of this book reveals that when Trumpelman gives in to his worst impulses, he is manipulated into doing so by the Nazis—the real objects of

the extended tendentious joke that is *King of the Jews*.

Des Pres has referred to Trumpelman as a larger-than-life trickster figure (219). Thus, he fits Alan R. Pratt's description of the typical black-humor protagonist—a "picaresque antihero" (xxi). Miriam Maltz characterizes Trumpelman as a rogue or rascal, and she places him in the tradition of Til Eulenspiegel (the protagonist in a collection of sixteenth-century satirical German tales), the American confidence man, and the shrewd Yankee peddler. Trumpelman, like these other picaresque figures, has undergone a series of adventures. He relates fabulous tales of his exploits in America, where he supposedly brought off miraculous escapes involving a shipwreck, Indians, and wild animals (Maltz 80). Maltz points out that Trumpelman is, in fact, a true escape artist in Epstein's book, where he eludes execution with the rest of the Judenrat, emerges unharmed from a burning house, survives several assassination attempts by the Jewish Underground, and disappears from the train transporting the last Ghetto inmates to Auschwitz (81). His apparent indestructibility might render him comparable to a comic-book hero (Schiff 25).

The picaresque figure also typically assumes a variety of identities and disguises. Trumpelman is a Lithuanian who takes up residency in Poland. He establishes a practice as a physician, although his credentials are dubious, at best. In addition, he serves as Deputy Chairman of the Public Health Department, life insurance salesman, director of an orphan asylum, and eventually, head of the Judenrat (Maltz 81).

For a deeper understanding of Trumpelman, we might revisit Jay Boyer's comments on fictional protagonists, noted in Chapter 2 of this dissertation. He suggested that while traditional protagonists have had a choice between

accommodation and rebellion, the black-humor protagonist no longer has that choice. He further suggested that the humor frequently lies in his inability to recognize this. Trumpelman had no real choice. He is a hero who, as one critic eloquently states, “has to play, even if there is no game” (Jan Kott, qtd. in Schiff 30). Accommodation was the only avenue open to him, and that only won him and his people a temporary stay of execution. Rebellion was out of the question. His absurd predicament was manmade rather than metaphysical, but no less real and agonizing. A good deal of the dark humor in the book does, in fact, come from his self-delusion over his own agency.

The manner in which the action unfolds also helps to determine the tone of the book. Comedy continually merges with tragedy—to the considerable dismay of Epstein’s critics. The lethal game of leapfrog described above is a prime example of this strategy. Parody is another comedic device that Epstein uses liberally. The above-noted debate over the founding of the Judenrat is, as Maltz notes, a parody of a typical communal Jewish meeting. She points to Epstein’s description of the scene: ““Anyone looking in the window would have thought it was some kind of sale, an auction, not a matter of how Jews were to govern their lives”” (Epstein, *King* 64; qtd. in Maltz 82). Similarly, the audience at a ghetto production of *Makbet* is a parody of a typical Jewish theater audience, with everyone speaking out loud during the performance, commenting on the action. Horror intervenes when the Others break into the theater for a surprise roundup (Schiff 28).

The merging of humor and horror has literary precedents—most notably in the work of Franz Kafka. In his famous story “Metamorphosis,” for example, a man wakes up on an otherwise unremarkable day to find that he has been transformed into

an enormous, repulsive insect. In this story, “the inverted logic of nightmare—or terror—prevails” (Maltz 84), much as it did during the Holocaust. Yet the central conceit of the story is comedic at the same time as it is horrific, and Kafka imbues the story with further comedy as he relates the efforts of Gregor Samsa and his family to adjust to their predicament—which is not so different from that of the Jews of Europe who lived normal lives until they suddenly came to be regarded as vermin by their non-Jewish neighbors. Grim laughter may be the only appropriate—the only possible—response.

Much has been written about the limitations of language and of traditional literary forms in regard to Holocaust representation. Yet Epstein has used conventional language and traditional forms and stretched and combined them so that they provide something original and provocative. Traditional comic devices are used in tragic contexts. Historical narrative and fictional narrative merge and diverge as the author sees fit. Comedy highlights ugliness, and fiction highlights truth. Irreverence and irony coexist with respect and profound sorrow in this deeply felt, always honest book.

Chapter 5

Second-Generation Responses: Humor and Magic

There are events so extraordinary that they create a breach in history. It is as if time stops and then resumes—with everything changed. The world is then spoken of in relation to that event. Thus, we are now living in the post-9/11 world. We are living in the post-Holocaust world, as well; that event forever changed our assumptions about civilized man's moral and ethical standards. Certainly, those most profoundly changed by the events of the Holocaust were its relatively few survivors. The trauma they experienced was passed on, in turn, to their children, who are variously designated the Post-Holocaust Generation, the Second Generation, the Next Generation, or the Generation After. These designations are used by some scholars for all who were born in the Holocaust's aftermath—regardless of parentage—in recognition of the fact that all have been in some way marked.

This chapter will focus on three Second-Generation authors: Art Spiegelman, Michael Chabon, and Thane Rosenbaum. Spiegelman and Rosenbaum are children of Holocaust survivors; Chabon is not. All examine the legacy of the Holocaust, and all use two elements to respond to it: humor and magic.

Spiegelman's *Maus* is associated with humor primarily because of its comic-book format, which was seen to mark a daring departure from traditional Holocaust representation. In fact, it is not totally without precedent. A 15-page work that can be considered either a comic book or a brief graphic novel (the terms will be discussed below) appeared in 1942. It was written and illustrated by Horst Rosenthal, a camp inmate who was not to survive the war. On September 28, 1940, Rosenthal was imprisoned at Gurs—the largest internment camp in the Occupied Zone of France. In

August 1941 he was transferred to another camp, but he apparently was re-interned at Gurs during 1942. On September 11, 1942, he was deported to Drancy. Soon afterward, he arrived at Auschwitz, where he was murdered (Rosenberg 273-74).

Conditions at the camp at Gurs were deplorable, yet its inmates were determined to maintain as rich a cultural life as they could. Incredibly, camp life included lectures, plays, concerts, cabaret shows, and art exhibits, and an ironic humor was present in much of the inmates' original work (Rosenberg 274). It surely was present in Rosenthal's booklet *Mickey Mouse in the Gurs Internment Camp*.

In the recently published collection of essays *The Jewish Graphic Novel*, Lisa Naomi Mulman focuses on Rosenthal's work as a precursor to *Maus*. Spiegelman had memorably chosen for an epigraph to *Maus II A Survivor's Tale: And Here My Troubles Began* a quote from a German newspaper article published in the mid-1930s:

Mickey Mouse is the most miserable ideal ever revealed. . . . Healthy emotions tell every independent young man and every honorable youth that the dirty and filth-covered vermin, the greatest bacteria carrier in the animal kingdom, cannot be the ideal type of animal. . . . Away with Jewish brutalization of the people! Down with Mickey Mouse! Wear the swastika cross! (3)

This passage would read like an amusing parody of Nazi propaganda were we not certain of its authenticity and aware of the consequences such words provoked.

Spiegelman saw in it the embodiment of Nazism's view of the Jew and a justification for his cat-and-mouse metaphor.

Rosenthal's booklet has never been published; it has been preserved at the Memorial de la Shoah in Paris and reproduced by permission in *The Jewish Graphic Novel*. Rosenthal's Mickey Mouse is an exact replica of Walt Disney's. He is stopped by a policeman one day and ordered to produce his papers. "I have no papers. I'm international," Mickey replies genially, yet with a hint of irreverence. He is promptly arrested, and though baffled, he seems to face his predicament with characteristic cheerfulness and pluck. Yet the text is deeply ironic, with Rosenthal's bitter sarcasm seeping through Mickey's bemused comments on camp life. This ironic text, coupled with charming, childlike cartoon illustrations, communicates its message in an especially powerful, jarring way. Mulman finds the same phenomenon in *Maus*, although certainly the illustrations in *Maus* are far less innocent.

Before long, finding the place decidedly not to his liking, Mickey informs the reader, "I removed myself with a stroke of an eraser" (*Jewish Graphic Novel* Plate 1). This is the point at which reality overtakes fantasy; the inmates at Gurs and other places like it had no means of saving themselves.

Mulman notes that *Mickey Mouse in the Gurs Internment Camp* was hardly the first work in which the Jewish experience is projected onto animals or insects. This device is a staple of the Eastern European Jewish literary tradition. Spiegelman, himself, has acknowledged the influence of Kafka—particularly of his story "Josephine the Singer, or The Mouse Folk," in which a population of mice lives precariously in a world bent on its extermination (Berger, *Children* 62).

Nor does Rosenthal's work stand alone as a Holocaust comic book. Another one, also featuring anthropomorphic animals, was *La bete est morte!*, produced in France at the end of 1944, while the Holocaust was still in progress. It was written by

Victor Dancette and Jacques Zimmermann and illustrated by Pierre-Edmond Calvo. This work allegorically describes the Nazis, referred to as “the hordes of the Great Wolf,” enacting a diabolical scheme for the destruction of the Jews, referred to as “certain tribes of peaceful animals.” “Dispersing the members of their tribes to distant regions, severing wives from their husbands and children from their mothers,” the authors write, “they aimed thus to utterly wipe out an inoffensive people whose only crime consisted in refusing to bend to the will of the Beast” (qtd. in Bruttmann 180-81). The animals representing the Jews are depicted wearing the yellow star; they are seen being deported in cattle cars. It took considerable audacity to write and publish a work so explicit while France was still partially occupied.

Also notable is “Master Race,” by Bernie Krigstein. This story appeared in March 1955 in the first issue of the *Impact* series of comic books, published by EC Comics. It is eight pages long, with an emphasis on images rather than text, and it has a complicated plot with a surprise twist at the end—typical of the works offered by its publisher. It was groundbreaking because it was one of the first attempts of the post-war years to bring the events of the Holocaust to public consciousness (Versaci 105). A number of comic artists have been influenced by “Master Race,” including Art Spiegelman, who made it the subject of a college term paper and subsequently wrote an article on it that was published in the *New Yorker* (Bruttmann 186).

Still, Spiegelman faced a good deal of skepticism and criticism over his choice of the comic-book medium, and of the mouse metaphor, as well. The gravest of subjects was being represented in a medium considered appropriate only for the most trivial. “Juvenile, disposable trash” is how comic books were commonly characterized (Versaci 2). Spiegelman responded to his critics by pointing out that comic-book

artists traditionally have dismissed the dichotomy of high art / low art.

Even those who do subscribe to that dichotomy may be confused over the terms “medium” and “genre.” As comic-book artists tirelessly point out, comic books are the former, not the latter (Wolk 11). Romance, science fiction, and horror, for example, are genres. Journals, television, and film are media. They can be mixed and matched in any manner. A medium can address any type of content—serious or frivolous. The genre of Holocaust literature can be represented in the medium of the comic book without any contradiction.

For those still uncomfortable with the term “comic book,” the term “graphic novel” was invented. As writer on comic books Douglas Wolk notes, “The cheap way of referring to them is ‘comics’ or ‘comic books’; the fancy way is ‘graphic novels’ (or ‘graphic narratives’ or ‘sequential art’). Whatever you call them marks you as a product of an ideology” (61). But even Wolk admits that calling them “comic” is misleading.

Finally, there are those committed to the notion that the properties of the comic book might make it not only an acceptable medium for the representation of serious subjects, but, in some cases, a superior one. Comics scholar Hilary Chute defines the comic book as “a hybrid word-and-image form in which two narrative tracks, one verbal and one visual, *register temporality spatially*” [italics mine]. She notes further that the comic book “doesn’t blend the visual and the verbal—or use one simply to illustrate the other—but is rather prone to present the two nonsynchronously.” Moments from the past, the present, and the future can be represented simultaneously on the page. The panels, or frames, in the comic book indicate the division of time. Chute notes that the reader of comics “not only fills in

the gaps between panels but also works with the often disjunctive back-and-forth of *reading* and *looking* for meaning” (“Comics” 452). Thus, the reader is made to engage actively in the process of considering how time, or history, leaves its mark on the present. Chute concludes that this renders comics uniquely suited to the representation of history.

The past and the present can coexist within a single panel, as well. *Maus*, in which the narrative is constantly shifting between World-War-II Europe and twentieth-century New York, offers numerous examples. Chute notes the now iconic panel in which Art works at his drawing board while mouse corpses from Auschwitz pile up beneath him (II: 41). Jeanne Ewart (“Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*” 189) cites the panel in which, on a drive through a forest in the Catskills, Vladek relates the story of four young girls who had been hanged for smuggling ammunition into Auschwitz; we see their legs hanging from the trees as he drives along (II: 189). The past—especially the traumatic past—is always present. Panels such as these illustrate how comic books may be well suited to the representation of trauma, as well.

This includes immediate as well as latent trauma. It has been argued that images convey meaning more profoundly and with greater immediacy than words. This may be true of both starkly horrific images—such as the one in *Maus II* of mice crying out in agony as they are being burned alive (72)—and of more subtle images, as well. In one frame in *Maus I*, Anja holds her young son, Richieu, over her shoulder. The speech balloon contains the words, “I’ll **never** give up my baby. **Never!**” (81). The situation is extraordinary, but the words are not. However, the way in which the child’s soft back curves and drapes over his mother’s shoulder speaks volumes about his vulnerability, and the black rings around Anja’s eyes immediately convey her

torment.

Complex psychological processes, such as those that survivors' children are likely to go through, may be traced with considerable deftness in comics, as Ewert has noted. She chooses, as an example, Art's discussion of his depression following the publication of *Maus I*. The segment starts with the image, noted above, of Art working at his drawing board. He feels unsure of whether he had any right to attempt the representation of his parents' Holocaust experience and guilty over having profited from it. As the segment proceeds, Art appears "progressively infantilized." He shrinks in size and eventually cries out "I want my MOMMY!" Climbing off his chair, he makes his way to his psychiatrist's office, where, in the course of working through his feelings, he gradually grows back to his adult size (Ewert, "Art Spiegelman's *Maus*" 183).

The ability of comics to represent two accounts of any given event simultaneously renders them well suited to address the problems of witnessing. Ewert cites the way in which visual images in *Maus* may cast doubt on the reliability of Vladek's testimony ("Art Spiegelman's *Maus*" 190). She notes, particularly, the segment in which Vladek and Art debate the presence of an orchestra at Auschwitz (II: 54). Vladek describes marching to work in the morning; the text is illustrated with an image of an orchestra playing. Art mentions to Vladek that he has read about the orchestra that accompanied the prisoners on their way to work. Vladek claims to have no memory of such an orchestra, and he states that it is very unlikely that there ever was one. Art counters that its existence is well documented. The subject is dropped. When there is another image of the prisoners marching to work, the orchestra appears to have been omitted. Yet Ewert notices that the ears and baton of

the conductor, as well as the top of the double bass, are still just barely visible over the heads of the prisoners. Spiegelman is suggesting that Vladek's post-traumatic memory of conditions at Auschwitz may be faulty. As Ewert points out, Spiegelman's visual images do not merely illustrate Vladek's narrative; they also explain, interpret, and provide a running editorial commentary ("Art Spiegelman's *Maus*" 190).

Finally, and perhaps most obviously, comic books may be suited to Holocaust representation because, as Paul Buhle has stated, "only the caricatured quality of comic art is equal to the seeming unreality of an experience beyond all reason" (qtd. in Chute, "The Shadow").

As noted above, not only the comic-book format of *Maus*, but its cat-and-mouse metaphor, as well, aroused skepticism. Some felt that it was an affront to the dignity of the Holocaust's victims. Cynthia Ozick found the portrayal of Jews as prey problematic, arguing, "'Prey is legitimate in nature; you can't argue with cats when they catch mice and kill them. It's killing, not murder. . . . The Germans were not cats and the Jews were not mice; both were human. And *that* is the *real* point in contemplating the Holocaust'" (qtd. in Furman, "Inheriting" 86).

What Ozick says is true, but the Germans in *Maus* are not quite cats, and the Jews are not precisely mice, either. Both are curious, complex hybrid creatures. A look at Spiegelman's initial sketches for *Maus* reveals that his first, highly realistic depictions became progressively simpler and more abstract (Ewert, "Reading" 97). Of course, it is the simply drawn mice that made it into the final text.

Scott McCloud, in his seminal work *Understanding Comics*, discusses this strategy of simplification in comics, without specific reference to *Maus*. He starts with

the concept of the icon, which he defines as “any image used to represent a person, place, thing, or idea” (27). He defines “pictures” as “images designed to actually resemble their subjects.” Of course, images can vary in their degree of resemblance. A photograph would have the greatest degree of resemblance to a human face, for example. Next might come a realistic drawing, and after that, a drawing done in the style of adventure comics. McCloud shows progressively simpler and more abstract images until he arrives at the “smiley face”—a ubiquitous cartoon of our times.

He moves on to a discussion of cartooning as a form of “amplification through simplification,” explaining that “when we abstract an image through cartooning, we’re not so much eliminating details as we are focusing on specific details. By stripping down an image to its essential ‘meaning,’ an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can’t” (30). McCloud then points out the universality of cartoon imagery, observing that the simpler and more abstract the image—the more cartoon-like—the more it can be seen to represent. A photograph, for example, represents only its subject; a smiley face cartoon represents anyone and everyone. It could even be oneself. McCloud states, “The cartoon is a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled . . . We don’t just observe the cartoon, we become it!” (36).

A few pages later, he explains that “by de-emphasizing the appearance of the physical world in favor of the idea of form, the cartoon places itself in the world of concepts” (41). He notes that although cartoons might *seem* to be bereft of the complexity and ambiguity that characterize much of modern literature, they are, in fact, rich in these qualities. It is up to the reader to “connect the dots”—to actively engage with the images and text in order to draw out meaning.

Clearly, Spiegelman chose to universalize his mice. As Mulman reminds us, during the Nazi era national identity completely dominated individual identity. One of Spiegelman's goals was to deconstruct such rigid national and ethnic identities. He has stated, "Ultimately, what the book is about is the commonality of human beings. It's crazy to divide things down the nationalistic or racial or religious lines" (qtd. in Mulman 88).

Spiegelman's technique in *Maus* differs markedly from that seen in his earlier work, which has been described as "typically exaggerated, violent, and at times hysterical, reflecting the psychological torment and sense of dislocation [underground cartoonists] often attempted to convey" (Charlson 97). The simplified, minimalist animals in *Maus* typically show very little differentiation in facial expression. The color palette extends from white to shades of gray to black. Spiegelman has plenty of psychological torment to convey, but "it is as though the material itself were so overwhelming that the drawings need to scale back, in a visual equivalent to the stripped-down diction of Primo Levi" (Charlson 97).

The animal metaphors in *Maus* serve other important functions, as well—unrelated to the style in which the animals are drawn. It might be said that they point to "the grim moral underpinnings of the fable tradition, in which might makes right, the strong exploit the weak, and any chance for survival depends upon a combination of luck, foresight, cynicism, and resourcefulness" (Wilner 108). On the other hand, whereas traditional animal fables offer fairly obvious moral instruction, *Maus* refuses to; it is consistently ambiguous, offering little in the way of instruction and just as little in the way of hope that instruction would do any good (Huyssen 70).

The animal metaphors do, however, put some distance between the reader and

the overwhelming material alluded to above. This mitigates the horror and prevents the reader from being, in fact, overwhelmed. In so doing, it leaves the reader free to respond to the material intellectually as well as emotionally. Even so demanding a critic as Lawrence Langer has praised this aspect of *Maus* (Cioffi 118).

Yet even as the animal metaphors offer a layer of protection between the reader and the text, they jar the reader out of any possible complacency by creating a kind of cognitive dissonance. This is especially true since cartoon animals are usually associated with benign children's stories (Cioffi 116-17). As Frank L. Cioffi has noted, by using animal metaphors, "Spiegelman thrusts onto readers the burden of reconstructing or imagining the actuality of the tale" (120). Once again, the reader is made to engage actively with the text. In a similar vein, Joseph Witek has argued that "by depicting the Jews and Nazis as animal figures, Spiegelman can defamiliarize his too well-known story and can sidestep the 'already told' quality of the Holocaust" (qtd. in Laga 62). At a time when Holocaust fatigue has set in and Holocaust denial persists, finding original and compelling means of Holocaust representation is critical.

It is especially ironic that *Maus*, written with the intention of subverting racial and ethnic stereotypes, has been criticized for promoting them. Noted Holocaust scholar Dominick LaCapra suggests that it is "dubious to represent entire peoples or nationalities in terms of one-dimensional animal caricatures and 'bestial' stereotypes" (161). Charlson goes so far as to suggest that Spiegelman's use of animal metaphors might be comparable to Hitler's stereotyping of the Jews (99). There are a number of possible ways to deflect this criticism (and in fact, LaCapra and Charlson, themselves, find a few). Most obviously, in using his animal metaphors, Spiegelman was "representing the world in the simplified but starkly authentic way the victims of the

Nazis experienced it . . . The world was a theater of stereotypes, of masklike signs of danger or indifference” (Miles Orvell, qtd. in Cioffi 120).

Masks, in fact, play a central role in *Maus*. As noted above, *Maus* is populated by complex hybrid creatures. This characterization is true for humans as well as animals. La Capra refers to the “bottomless multiplication of the mask” (163) in *Maus* and how it problematizes identity. As he points out, one can never be certain of what lies behind the masks. Furthermore, Spiegelman demonstrates a postmodern sense of the fluidity of identity. In *Maus* he has his characters use masks to hide and change theirs. For example, Vladek—a mouse—dons a pig mask to pass as a Pole.

The masks play a more complex role in the frames that represent introspection. In those that open “Auschwitz (Time Flies),” the second chapter of Volume II, Art, working at his drawing board, is himself drawn as a human being wearing a mouse mask. It is as if the burden of trying to relate his parents’ Holocaust experiences has confused him and made him question his own identity as a second-hand victim and witness.

Then, on his way to his appointment with his psychotherapist, Pavel—a survivor of both Terezin and Auschwitz—Art is once again portrayed as a human being wearing a mouse mask. Pavel is portrayed in the same manner. Over the course of the session, both may or may not periodically drop their masks; it is difficult to tell—Spiegelman’s drawings are ambiguous, as is his intent. What is clear is that the masks “draw attention to themselves as such, never inviting us to mistake memory of events for events themselves” (James Young, qtd. in Versaci 92). This is an important issue—to be discussed below—for Second-Generation writers.

So, we can infer that these “inconsistencies” are deliberate. Spiegelman has

been quoted as saying that “the metaphor is meant to be shed like a snakeskin” (Joseph Witek, qtd. in Ewert, “Reading” 95). As Ewert points out, the inclusion within the text of frames from a previously written comic book—*Prisoner from Hell Planet*—in which Art and his parents are represented as unambiguously human, collapses his metaphor. So does the inclusion of family photos. The three that appear in *Maus*—one of Art and Anja, one of Richieu (the lost brother), and one of Vladek—reconfirm the humanity of the characters (Versaci 93).

Spiegelman also draws frames that deflate his metaphors. In one, Anja and Vladek are hiding in a storage locker when a rat appears. The rat is drawn quite realistically. Vladek (drawn as a mouse in Spiegelman’s abstract, pared-down style) tries to calm Anja by telling her, “Those aren’t rats. They’re very small. One ran over my hand before. They’re just mice!” (I: 147). In the segment noted above, in which Art visits Pavel, a caption reads, “His place is overrun with stray dogs and cats.” Within the same frame, another caption reads, “Can I mention this, or does it completely louse up my metaphor?” (II: 43).

Such moments obviously highlight the artifice within Spiegelman’s project. It has been suggested that the photographs he has included perform the same function. The appearance of one media form within another—referred to as intermedia reflexivity—draws attention away from content and toward form. Consequently, the project seems less like a direct window into reality (Jones 382). The photographs in *Maus* contrast history with its attempted representation.

Using masks, deflating his own metaphors, and highlighting the artifice within his work are all strong signals that Spiegelman is deeply uneasy with the task of attempting to represent the Holocaust. In fact, he bluntly states his anxiety at several

points within the text. As intense as his need to understand his parents' past is—and its intensity is evidenced by his despair upon learning that Anja's diaries have been destroyed—he remains aware of his own irrevocable distance from that past. All Second-Generation writers about the Holocaust are assuming the impossible task of testifying to events they never witnessed. Even imagining these events is a daunting task.

What Spiegelman is offering in *Maus* is Vladek's memory of history. *Maus* is as much about the transmission of memory as anything else, and that, in itself, is a worthy subject. Marianne Hirsh coined the term "postmemory" to describe a phenomenon among members of the Second Generation in which traumatic experiences that occurred before their births have been transmitted to them so powerfully that they seem to constitute memories of their own. "Seem" is the operative word here; Hirsh is careful to stress that this received memory is "not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation" (107). This gives rise to a number of ethical questions for Second-Generation writers: "How, in our present, do we regard and recall . . . 'the pain of others'? What do we owe the victims? How can we best carry their stories forward without appropriating them, without unduly calling attention to ourselves, and without, in turn, having our own stories displaced by them? How are we implicated in the crimes?" (Hirsh104). Spiegelman struggles with these questions throughout *Maus*.

Closely related to the concept of postmemory is the concept of secondhand witnessing, discussed in Chapter 1 of this dissertation. It was noted there that one does not necessarily have to be present at the original site of trauma in order to be marked, or traumatized; one can be traumatized by testimony alone. Members of the Second

Generation may be traumatized by their parents' testimony. Nadine Fresco observes that they may be "like people who have had a hand amputated that they never had" and then experience "a phantom pain." When the secondhand witness is an artist, his art bears witness to the "presence of an absence" (Berger, *Children* 2).

There is pain that the Second Generation has had to deal with that has been real and present enough. It has come from the over-protectiveness, separation anxiety, lack of parental respect for boundaries, insensitivity to children's own emotional needs, and atmosphere of incomplete or perpetual mourning that may exist within survivor families (Berger, *Children* 10). In addition, many in the Second Generation must deal with what Deborah Lipstadt has referred to as the "phenomenon of the impossible comparison"—the feeling that their parents' lives have been so extraordinary that their own lives seem relatively meaningless, and that their parents' problems have been so enormous that their own seem relatively trivial (Berger, *Children* 14).

All of these issues, as well as the ethical questions posed on the preceding page, are recurring themes in Second-Generation literature. Art frets over unduly calling attention to himself just as he resists having his own history effaced. He suffers from what he perceives to be insensitivity to his own emotional needs, and he suffers from bouts of self-pity. We cringe when he lashes out at Vladek in anger and impatience.

At the same time, he is weighed down by enormous guilt, as we can see from *Prisoner from Hell Planet*. Such guilt is yet another common phenomenon among members of the Second Generation. They may feel guilty over not having experienced their parents' suffering or over not being able to adequately comprehend

or empathize with it.

Alain Finkelkraut, a child of Holocaust survivors, coined the term “the imaginary Jew” to describe the Second-Generation Jew who “attempts to identify with the murdered Jewish culture of Europe” (Berger, *Children* 2). Alan L. Berger, in a similar vein, suggests a tendency among the Second Generation to seek a mimesis of their parents’ past. He attributes this to a desire to somehow make sense of the Holocaust—to “master an unmasterable trauma” (*Children* 15). The Second-Generation writer seeks understanding that will enable him to give meaning to the events of the past and assemble an identity of his own. These were clearly among Spiegelman’s objectives.

The Second Generation also deals with the past through humor. This statement at first seems incongruous in light of the above discussion of trauma and its consequences, but less so when we remember that humor historically has been an analgesic for the Jewish people. Early in *Maus*, before the ghettos and deportations but after the German occupation of Poland, Vladek attempts to distract and calm Anja with a joke; he notes that he used this strategy routinely (I: 35).

Kevin A. Morrison calls Spiegelman’s mode of representation in *Maus* satirical irony, pointing especially to Spiegelman’s technique of “working within familiar Nazi tropes in order to subvert them” (59). He is referring, of course, to Spiegelman’s ironic appropriation of the Nazi propaganda that equated Jews with vermin.

The Nazis, themselves, employed irony—consciously or not. Morrison illustrates this with a quote from Slavoj Žižek: “‘The bands playing while the Jews marched to the gas chambers or to work [and] the notorious ‘Arbeit macht frei!’

inscription above the entrance to Auschwitz [were all] unmistakable signs that the ‘final solution’ was carried out as a gigantic joke which submitted the victims to supplementary acts of gratuitous, cruel and ironic humiliation” (qtd. in Morrison 60). To Morrison, one of Spiegelman’s greatest achievements in *Maus* was using a device that the Nazis themselves used—irony—and stretching it to its satirical limits. The use of the comic book medium is in itself ironic.

Spiegelman’s animal metaphors provide a protective distance between the reader and the horrific material being read, as noted above. They provided distance for Spiegelman, as well—acting as a kind of coping mechanism as he related his painful story. Terence Des Pres refers to the use of animals as a “fairy tale element” of *Maus*. As noted in Chapter 4 of this dissertation, the fairy tale is an ideal genre for representing an experience in which the realistic veers off into the fantastic. The fairy tale element of *Maus* serves this function and, in addition, acted for Spiegelman as “a comic shield against knowledge too starkly hideous and weighted with guilt to face apart from laughter’s mitigation” (Des Pres 228).

Certainly, there is nothing comical about the story Vladek relates, although Des Pres refers to moments of “fantastic slapstick horror” as he and Anja struggle to survive (228). Much of the comedy that does exist in *Maus* derives from Art’s troubled relationship with Vladek. Dominick LaCapra has aptly noted that *Maus* chronicles “the plight of the intellectual, sensitive, vaguely inept and overwhelmed son confronting an impossible but necessarily iconic survivor-father” (142). Were Vladek not a survivor, we would be on very familiar terrain. As it is, it appears that Artie’s greatest horror is the prospect of moving in with Vladek and that his survival as an intact, sane individual is heavily predicated on his ability to maintain his sense

of the comic (Ethan Mordden, in Cory 38).

Vladek is the kind of parent who is a staple of Jewish humor. He is a master guilt peddler, at one point leaving a false message declaring that he has suffered a heart attack in order to ensure that Artie returns his phone call (II: 12-13). He is exceedingly cheap. He rebukes Artie for using one of his wooden matches; he has to buy them, while he can get paper matches free from the lobby of the Pines Hotel. A few pages later we learn that to save matches, he leaves the gas on all day, since gas is included in the rent (II: 20, 22). Another episode finds him attempting to return groceries, including open boxes of cereal and partially eaten food. Artie and Francoise watch, mortified, from the car as Vladek trails the manager around the store, shouting at his back. The suffering endured at Auschwitz is obliquely compared to the suffering endured while observing Vladek's antics (II: 89-90).

The grocery episode is introduced by a story of severe food shortages at Dachau. Vladek's second wife, Mala, states that there are plenty of survivors who are not as cheap as Vladek. (She jokes bitterly that he married her so he wouldn't have to throw out Anja's old clothes, since she wears the same size.) Still, it is fair to conclude that his miserliness is rooted in his Holocaust past, when the essentials of life had to be hoarded. His past accounts for his compulsion to scavenge, as well, which drives Artie to distraction. Everything, such as a piece of phone wire noticed on the street, is regarded by Vladek as potentially valuable; decades after the War, he is still "organizing." Des Pres points out that all of this, in addition to the constant bickering between Vladek and Mala and Vladek's manipulation of his family by feigning heart trouble, are "almost situation comedy, the sort of thing[s] that, apart from [their] terrible background, we expect on television" (228). Yet our knowledge

of that terrible background shapes our understanding of Vladek's behavior.

The trickster motif was discussed in Chapter 4 of this dissertation, and it is relevant here, as well. Vladek is a classic trickster. He used his cunning in order to survive during the War—disguising himself as a Pole, claiming expertise at trades he had never practiced, and organizing food and clothing to trade for privileges. David Mikics somewhat euphemistically refers to this as “survival through interpretive agility”—something that it is highly valued within the Jewish tradition (15).

The schlemiel—a stock figure in Jewish humor discussed in Chapter 2 of this dissertation—makes an appearance in *Maus*, as well. Vladek tells Artie of his friend and fellow-inmate at Auschwitz, Mandelbaum:

For me it was hard here, but for my friend Mandelbaum
it was more hard. In Sosnowiec, everyone knew Mandelbaum.
He was older as me, nice, a very rich man. But now, in
Auschwitz, Mandelbaum was a **mess**. His pants were big
like for 2 people, and he had not even a piece of string to
make a belt. He had all day to hold them with one hand. . . .
One shoe was big like a boat. But this at least he could wear.
One shoe, his foot was too big to go in. This also he had to hold
so he could find maybe with whom to exchange it. It was winter,
and everywhere he had to go around with one foot onto the
snow. (II: 29)

When Mandelbaum loses his spoon, he tells Vladek:

I dropped it, and by the time I bent down, someone stole it.
I spilled most of my soup, too. When I asked for more, they

beat me. I hold onto my bowl and my shoe falls down. I

pick up the shoe and my **pants** fall down. But what can I do?

I only have two hands! (II: 29)

Yet the story of Mandelbaum is not precisely a classic schlemiel story. His weakness is never portrayed as a kind of strength, and it would never be perceived as such. As noted in Chapter 2 of this dissertation, Ruth Wisse wrote that Jews “used the schlemiel as a model of endurance, his innocence a shield against corruption, his absolute defenselessness the only guaranteed defense against the brutalizing potential of might” (5). Mandelbaum’s innocence will not shield him, and his defenselessness will not protect him from brutality. There will be no moral victory. There will be barely endurable suffering, and then, extermination.

The story of Mandelbaum, perhaps, rests not so much on schlemiel humor as on black humor, in which horror and humor coexist. Certainly, Mandelbaum’s predicament is terrifying and absurd. All of his beliefs about the world have been shattered. There is no hope of redemption. He has no agency—no ability to choose between accommodation and rebellion. The story might even be an example of the grotesque, which “points to the inhuman and the abyss” (O’Neil 178-79).

A more playful kind of black humor can be found in the scene in which Vladek relates the story of Art’s birth. Anja’s labor had been difficult. Vladek tells Art, “I found a specialist what saved you. . . . He had to break your **arm** to take you out from Anja’s belly! And when you were a tiny baby your arm always jumped up like so! [Vladek demonstrates the infamous Nazi salute.] We joked and called you ‘Heil Hitler’” (I: 30).

Vladek’s dark sense of humor and his general pessimism make his references

to religion and the supernatural seem particularly incongruous. Upon reflection, though, it does not seem so surprising that in the absence of realistic hope, one might turn to magic. Vladek tells Artie of a dream he had had while at a POW camp. He had heard his dead grandfather's voice telling him, "'Don't worry, my child, you will come out of this place—FREE! . . . On the day of Parshas Truma'" (I: 57). Vladek had awakened and gone back to sleep, with the words "Parshas Truma" repeating themselves in his dreams. Artie asks Vladek the meaning of the words, and Vladek replies, "Each week, on Saturday, we read a section from the Torah. This is so called—a parsha . . . and one week each year it is Parshas Truma" (I: 57). Vladek had asked a rabbi who had also been imprisoned at the camp when Parshas Truma would be read. It would not be read for another three months.

Time had passed, until one day a contingent of soldiers had appeared at the camp. The soldiers had ordered the prisoners to line up in two rows. The rabbi had stepped in line next to Vladek and asked, "'Do you know what day it is?'" "'Saturday, of course,'" Vladek had replied. The rabbi had continued, "'But do you know what a Saturday? . . . It's Parshas Truma!'" (I: 58). Sure enough, Vladek had been released on that day. He goes on to tell Art that he had checked later and found that he had married Anja on the week of Parshas Truma, that Art had been born during the week of Parshas Truma, and that, consequently, Art had sung Parshas Truma at his bar mitzvah. Thus Efraim Sicher characterizes Art's bar mitzvah as "literally a confirmation into the story of survival in the Holocaust" (*Breaking* 49).

He notes, however, that for Spiegelman, as for so many young Jews, bar mitzvah seems to have served as a point of exit from Jewish life rather than as a point of entry into it. In Sicher's view, *Maus* is predominantly about Spiegelman's vexed

relationship with Judaism. He quotes from an interview in which Spiegelman had commented, “I often thought life would be a lot easier if I were not Jewish” (*Breaking* 261). Then, as if pointing out a contradiction, he notes that Spiegelman had gone on to read widely about the Holocaust and even to visit Auschwitz. Certainly, one can wish to learn about the Holocaust—especially when it has profoundly affected one’s own family and, consequently, oneself—without wishing to be more Jewish. A visit to Auschwitz could only have convinced Spiegelman that life *can*, indeed, be a lot easier for non-Jews. Sicher concedes that Spiegelman was drawn to the Holocaust—not traditional Jewish ritual. Like many others, Spiegelman views Judaism in a secular context (*Breaking* 261).

Sicher assumes that Spiegelman is guilt-ridden over his “abandonment” of Judaism. To prove this he turns to “Prisoner on the Hell Planet,” in which Anja’s funeral is depicted. There, rather than recite the Kaddish, Artie reads from the Tibetan Book of the Dead. This appears to be an act of rejection and rebellion, although Art explains it by stating that he had been “pretty *spaced out* in those days” (I: 102). He expresses no guilt for this act. The guilt he expresses in “Hell Planet” is for not feeling what he believes to be adequate grief over Anja’s death and for not having been more sensitive to her needs and her obvious pain while she was alive. Guilt over his broken connection to Judaism seems to be a projection of Sicher’s.

Yet Sicher is correct in recognizing Vladek’s still-intact connection, as evidenced by his belief that the Parshas Truma dream had been, in fact, a prophecy. In addition, Sicher explains that the dream is theologically significant because “this particular parsha refers to the divine presence dwelling among Israel.” He notes that one might conclude that “as God dwells in the camp of Israel (Exodus 25:8) . . . so

does He dwell in the prisoner of war camp” (*Breaking* 262). It is conceivable (though unlikely) that Vladek had considered that possibility. At any rate, if he had not believed in the significance of his dream at some level, he would not have related it to Artie.

Stephen E. Tabachnick broadens the question of Spiegelman’s connection to Judaism; he considers whether Spiegelman believes in any kind of supernatural or divine power that might influence or determine the course of one’s life. He calls attention to a scene in *Maus* in which Vladek—his Auschwitz tattoo exposed—speaks of playing bingo at the Pines hotel. To Tabachnick, this brings to mind the question of why some survived while others did not. Was survival a matter of pure chance or the result of some otherworldly intervention?

Tabachnick acknowledges Spiegelman’s portrayal of himself as a liberal, secular Jew. As Sicher did, he refers to the scene of Anja’s funeral in “Prisoner on the Hell Planet” and Art’s reading from the Tibetan Book of the Dead. Yet Tabachnick, in recalling this scene, focuses on Art as a “bohemian, ‘hippie’ type, interested in Buddhist mysticism and non-Western spiritual experience” (2). He concludes that though Spiegelman is far from being a traditional Jew, he is also far from being entirely secular.

Tabachnick points out that if Spiegelman were completely closed to the idea of divine or supernatural intervention, he would not have included events such as the Parshas Truma dream in *Maus*. As it is, he includes them free of any qualifying or skeptical commentary. Tabachnick also refers to an interview Spiegelman granted to the *Forward*, in which he spoke of “the great holy Jewish writings of [*Mad* magazine founder] Harvey Kurtzman and Franz Kafka” (Tabachnick 3). Spiegelman, he

concludes, does have a sense of the holy—however quirky it may be.

Another important incident involving a kind of magic—number mysticism—occurs later, at Auschwitz. Vladek had been tired, cold, and in tears when a Polish priest had approached him. ““Why are you crying, son?”” the priest had asked. Vladek had replied, with an irony and sarcasm not uncommon in Jewish humor, ““Should I be happy? Am I at a carnival?”” The priest had asked to see his arm. He then had told Vladek, ““Hmm . . . your number starts with 17. In Hebrew that’s ‘k’minyan tov.’ Seventeen is a very good omen. . . . It ends with a 13, the age a Jewish boy becomes a man. . . . And look! Added together it totals 18. That’s ‘chai,’ the Hebrew number of life. I can’t know if I’ll survive this Hell, but I’m certain you’ll come through all this alive”” (II: 28). Vladek tells Art that he had felt compelled to believe the priest’s words, and that this had kept him alive.

Finally, Spiegelman includes one additional scene in which one of his characters turns to magic. This time, it is Anja. Unable to get news of her family from the Jewish Organization in Sosnowiec, she resorts to a fortuneteller—portrayed by Spiegelman as a Gypsy moth. Vladek tells Artie, ““Anja knew it was foolish, but she looked only for some hope”” (II: 133). The fortuneteller tells Anja, ““I see tragedy . . . death! . . . You’ve lost your father . . . your mother . . . everyone! I see a child . . . a dead child.”” Anja sobs, ““Richieu! My little boy, Richieu.”” The fortuneteller continues, ““Wait! Now I see a man . . . illness. . . . It’s your husband! He’s been very ill. . . . He’s coming—he’s coming home! You’ll get a sign that he’s alive by the time the moon is full! I see a ship . . . a faraway place . . . you’ll have a new life . . . and another little boy”” (II: 133). Once again, a prophecy comes true.

Tabachnick acknowledges that interpreting dreams, practicing numerology,

and seeking the guidance of a fortune teller are not the traditional ways in which Jews seek understanding. (In fact, *gematria*, or number mysticism, does have a place in the Jewish tradition.) Yet to him, the accuracy of the priest's and the Gypsy's predictions render them "messengers from the divine" (7). He may believe that, and Vladek may have believed that, but there is no indication that—as Tabachnick persistently suggests—Spiegelman believes that.

Tabachnick goes to great pains to point out that Vladek was not saved by virtue, luck, or cleverness. To Tabachnick, the only alternative left is divine intervention. He fails to consider the possibility that Vladek's and Anja's survival were totally random events, devoid of any particular meaning. A great many survivors have described their own survival in just such terms.

Tabachnick ultimately makes the startling claim that *Maus* implies that "Vladek and Anja were divinely chosen and encouraged to survive in order to give birth to Art Spiegelman. Only Art Spiegelman would create one of the most memorable monuments not only to his parents' travails and that of their generation, but to his, as a member of the second generation of Holocaust witnesses" (9). No doubt Spiegelman would be flattered by such an assessment, but it is hard to imagine he would endorse it.

It seems that Spiegelman is more of a black humorist than a man of God. The world he portrays so masterfully is absurd and terrifying. Both good and evil appear unpredictably and inexplicably. Alan L. Berger states that Spiegelman "puts the notion of a conventional deity on trial [and] assumes that all the evidence is in and that God is guilty." He continues, "Spiegelman's definition of Judaism is distinctly contemporary, having nothing to do with either *halakah* or classical texts" (*Children*

70). Like Sicher, he recognizes that Spiegelman is bound to Judaism by his role as a Second-Generation witness to the Holocaust. Spiegelman, himself, has said as much in interviews. Still, Spiegelman and his wife, Francoise Mouly, made the ultimate affirmation of hope; they went on to have two children, members of the Third Generation.

Born in 1963, Michael Chabon actually straddles the Second and Third generations. Yet his deep sensitivity to issues surrounding the Holocaust, his avid interest in the history and special capabilities of comic books, and his understanding of the possibilities of magic all make a comparison between him and Art Spiegelman natural.

The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay begins at a pivotal time in the history of America and of comic books, as well. It was the time of the Great Depression, and anti-Semitism was an entrenched feature of American society. Jews were barred from employment in the print press and in advertising. There was, however, a Jewish presence at the head of drawing workshops, which allowed for the hiring of a good number of the children of impoverished Jewish immigrants. Eventually, Jewish writers and illustrators went on to play major roles in the development of the medium. Among the most prominent were Will Eisner, Joe Shuster and Jerry Siegel (co-creators of *Superman*), and Bob Kane (creator of *Batman*) (Bruttman 186-87).

With the ascent of Jews in the comic-book industry came the appearance of Jewish themes and of stories touching upon anti-Semitism. These are especially evident in the work of Eisner. Eisner unsparingly portrayed the cruelty and violence

that plagued Depression-era Jews dwelling in the tenements of New York City. Toward the end of his career he revisited Dickens's *Oliver Twist* with the graphic novel *Fagin the Jew*. In regard to his inspiration for that work, Eisner observed, "examining the illustrations of the original editions of *Oliver Twist*, I found an unquestionable example of visual defamation in classic literature. The memory of their awful use by the Nazis in World War II, one hundred years later, added evidence to the persistence of evil stereotyping. Combating it became an obsessive pursuit" (qtd. in Baskind and Omer-Sherman xx). He ended his career with another important graphic novel, *The Plot: The Secret Story of The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, published posthumously.

A history of comic books can be found within the pages of *Kavalier & Clay*. Chabon describes Shuster and Siegel's *Superman* as a vehicle for expressing "the lust for power and the gaudy sartorial taste of a race of powerless people with no leave to dress themselves" (77). Chabon expresses himself here with characteristic self-deprecating Jewish humor (he is, himself, a member of that "race"), but also with an awareness of the frustration and powerlessness Jews had felt at the time of *Superman*'s creation.

J. T. Waldman, illustrator of the graphic novel *Megillat Esther*, writes of how comic books relate to Jewish feelings of powerlessness and marginality, considering the possibility that they might be an "outsider art form" that embodies "the essence of an outsider culture" (xii). He also refers to Geoffrey Hartman's essay "On the Jewish Imagination," in which Hartman suggests that the Jewish imagination is permeated by concerns about continuity, by hope and humor, and by reticence (i.e., reluctance to accept both the status quo and authority). Waldman suggests that the same attributes

can be found in superhero comic books and graphic novels. He writes perceptively that “the ever-present Jewish anxiety about discontinuity is found in nearly every mainstream comic book as heroes strive to stop the end of the world or save the universe” (xii). *Superman, Spider-Man, and Batman*—as well as *Maus*—all relate stories of exiled men with catastrophic pasts looking for meaning, purpose, and hope. He finds traditional self-deprecating Jewish humor in *Mad* magazine and in *American Splendor*—both the products of Jewish imaginations. And he finds reticence in the skeptical, iconoclastic graphic novels of Will Eisner (xii).

Samantha Baskind and Ranen Omer-Sherman offer additional “quintessential narrative themes of the Jewish imagination: mobility, flight, adaptation, transformation, disguise, [and] metamorphosis” (xvii). A persecuted people, Jews historically have had to be prepared to gather their belongings and move on short notice. Whether in anticipation of calamity or in response to orders of expulsion, they have often found themselves in flight. The biblical exodus is the archetype of this phenomenon. Once established in exile, Jews have had to adapt to new environments. One of the great challenges of Jewish life has been to assimilate yet to avoid total transformation; the desire to maintain a Jewish identity has persisted. In the worst of circumstances, such as those endured by the Spiegelmans in *Maus*, Jews have had to resort to disguise and at least temporary metamorphosis.

These themes and others—all both distinctively Jewish and at the same time universal—are to be found in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*. Part I is entitled “The Escape Artist.” What could be a more important art for a Jew to know? In the first few pages, we find Josef Kavalier arriving at the Brooklyn home of his aunt and his cousin—Sammy Klayman—after having escaped occupied Prague.

Thus, the themes of mobility and flight are immediately referenced. The Holocaust is immediately referenced, as well, as Sammy awkwardly tells Josef, ““You know. . . we’re, uh, we’ve all been really worried . . . about Hitler . . . and the way he’s treating the Jews”” (12). We learn of the “dream of fabulous escape” (14) that had animated Josef. It is the same dream that, by necessity, has animated the Jewish people over the centuries.

But first we learn something about the famous Golem of Prague—a quintessential Jewish superhero. Golem lore dates back to the Babylonian Talmud (Sanhedrin 65b) and the *Sefer Yezirah (Book of Creation)*, an early kabbalistic text. The Golem of Prague first appeared within nineteenth-century oral tradition. Leopold Weisel wrote a version of the Golem of Prague story in *Sippurim* (1847-1856), and a number of accounts subsequently appeared. According to the basic story, Rabbi Judah Loew Ben Bezalel of Prague—a noted scholar of Torah and Kabbala—had created the Golem in 1600. The Golem was made of clay from the Moldau River, but he was then brought to semi-living form by God’s holy power. He was supposed to protect the inhabitants of the Prague ghetto from the threat of a pogrom. Rabbi Loew had acted in response to a blood libel that had been circulating. According to the story, the Golem had patrolled the streets of the ghetto until the threat had passed. Rabbi Loew then had returned him to his inanimate form and stored the clay body in the attic of Prague’s Altneuschul (Old New Synagogue), where it could be brought to life again if necessary (Behlman, “Michael” 226).

In Chabon’s novel, the Jews of Prague consider whether the Golem, himself, should be sent into exile; they fear his appropriation by the Nazis. Yet, as Chabon writes, there were those who “did not want to send the Golem away because in their

hearts they had not surrendered the childish hope that the great enemy of Jew-haters and blood libelers might one day, in a moment of dire need, be revived to fight again” (15). As in *Maus*, there is a longing to believe in magical solutions when reality offers no realistic ones.

Still, those in favor of removing the Golem win out. They appeal to Bernard Kornblum, a magician and escape artist in the mold of Harry Houdini (also a Jew). By coincidence—in a book abounding in coincidences—Josef Kavalier is seeking to escape Prague at the same time, and he approaches Kornblum. Kornblum instructs him in the art of escape. He knows where the Golem has been hidden, and he and Josef use their escapists’ skills to pick the lock of the apartment’s door. Inside, they find the Golem laid out in a super-sized casket. Chabon’s humor turns dark as he reveals Kornblum’s outrageous, intricate, and macabre scheme to spirit Josef out of Prague by placing him in the casket alongside the Golem (disguised as a “dead *goyische* giant”) and shipping them both to Lithuania. The plan works; Josef’s escape is achieved. He makes his way from Lithuania to the Klaymans’ Brooklyn apartment, where he immediately becomes immersed in the world of comic books, which Sammy’s mother identifies as “trash.” They are, in fact, widely used as vehicles of escape from an oppressively lackluster or menacing world. Chabon acknowledges from the outset that comics were an outsider art form and that educators, psychologists, and politicians with a medley of motives were inclined to share, and voice, Mrs. Klayman’s opinion.

Josef, coincidentally, is not only an accomplished magician, but an exceedingly gifted artist, as well. The boys approach Sheldon Anapol, of the Empire Novelty Company, and attempt to pitch an idea for a comic book to rival *Superman*.

When Anapol looks at Josef's conception of a superhero, he notices four Hebrew characters etched into his forehead and recognizes him as the Golem. "'To me, this Superman is . . . maybe . . . only an American Golem'" (86), Josef explains. And that is, after all, exactly what he is. It is not surprising that Josef, who has left his entire family behind to face an uncertain future at the hands of the Nazis, should be attracted to the idea of a Jewish savior. This may be seen as an example of the hope that, according to Hartman, permeates the Jewish imagination. A few pages later, trying to pinpoint a possible motive for a new superhero, Sammy explains to Joe that Batman had begun his mission of fighting evil after witnessing his own parents' murder. Joe begins to sense the possibility of vicarious revenge.

Sammy's father had performed in vaudeville as the Mighty Molecule—remembered by Sammy as the "World's Strongest Jew" (119). Chabon's humor frequently involves this kind of juxtaposition; physical strength had not been associated with Jews up to this point in history. His novel is largely built on the wish—the fantasy—that it might be from this point on. The world's strongest Jew—"that's what they need over there," muses Sammy. Then another idea takes hold—that of "a costumed hero whose power would be that of impossible and perpetual escape" (120). Chabon then inserts a footnote reminding the reader that "the still-fresh memory of Harry Houdini in the American mind thirteen years after his death—of his myth, his mysterious abilities, his physique, his feats, his dedicated hunting down and exposure of frauds and cheats—is a neglected source of the superhero idea in general; an argument in its favor, as it were" (120).

Addressing Josef, Sammy mimics the radio announcers of his day: "'To all those who toil in the bonds of slavery and, uh, the, the shackles of oppression, he

offers the hope of liberation and the promise of freedom! . . . Armed with superb physical and mental training, a crack team of assistants, and ancient wisdom, he roams the globe, performing amazing feats and coming to the aid of those who languish in tyranny's chains! He is—the Escapist!” He continues, ““He doesn't just fight [crime]. He *frees* the world of it. He *frees* people, see?”” (121).

Sammy and Joe, as written by Chabon, are more than two young men looking to cash in on a pop-culture phenomenon. They are also more than two semi-adults still immersed in adolescent revenge fantasies. Each, in his own way, is an outsider struggling to find a place for himself. Sammy is physically small, lame, professionally unsettled, and socially insecure. Joe is a refugee, struggling with the language, with loneliness, and with ever-present anxiety over his family. The theme of adaptation is prominent in Joe's story. All adolescents struggle with identity; Joe must not just discover, but actually create a new identity for himself. He must accomplish this in an environment in which his position is ambiguous, at best. Over the course of the novel we see Sammy and Joe attain self-awareness and political awareness. Most important, they move toward moral awareness.

The Escapist is part of a network called the League of the Golden Key; its nemesis is the Iron Chain. The boys explicitly identify the Iron Chain's base of operations as Germany—not some fantastic evil empire. “I wish he was real,” Joe admits to Sammy. Vicarious revenge is bringing him little satisfaction; he realizes that he is essentially powerless. Sammy encourages him by promising him that the Escapist will generate enough money for Joe to send for his family.

Sammy's idea is to put a picture of Hitler getting punched on the jaw on the cover of the comic book. Chabon writes of the cover Joe draws, “The violence of the

image was startling, beautiful, strange. It stirred mysterious feelings in the viewer, of hatred gratified, of cringing fear transmuted into smashing retribution, which few artists working in America, in the fall of 1939, could have tapped so easily and effectively as Josef Kavalier” (150).

“I don’t see Superman getting mixed up in politics,” Anapol reflects, upon looking at the cover. Another executive points out, “We’re not at war with Germany. It’s illegal to make fun of a king, or president, or somebody like that, if you’re not at war with them. We could get sued”(159). Still a third one suggests fictionalizing the nation and the characters that the League is opposing. The sentiment Chabon is portraying here is historically accurate. There was great reluctance to provoke Germany at this time. It will be noted in Chapter 6 of this dissertation that this was particularly true in the film industry—also largely under the leadership of Jewish executives. Later in *Kavalier & Clay*, when a production company is considering making the *Escapist* into a movie, Joe is reminded that the second-largest market for motion pictures, after the United States, is Germany.

Joe, who is finding his work on the *Escapist* “strangely redemptive,” resists making the suggested changes. He has been fantasizing about a copy of the comic book finding its way to Hitler’s desk in Berlin. He continues to draw the *Escapist*, imagining Hitler captured and brought before a world tribunal, where “head finally bowed in defeat and shame, [he] was sentenced to die for his crimes against humanity. The war was over; a universal era of peace was declared, the imprisoned and persecuted peoples of Europe—among them, implicitly and passionately, the Kavalier family of Prague—were free” (166). He feels as if he is fighting “if not a genuine war, then a tolerable substitute” (167). He has another purpose in mind, as well. He

hopes his drawings will serve as propaganda, moving Americans to take action.

Fiction and history intersect once again as Chabon writes a scene in which Joe visits the “Adjutant for Minority Relocation at the German consulate on Whitehall Street.” Joe also appeals to the HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society), the United Jewish Appeal for Refugees and Overseas Needs, to the New York office of the President’s Action Committee, and to numerous travel agents, hoping to facilitate his family’s rescue. It all comes to nothing. Even bribes are no longer productive. Obtaining a United States visa has become all but impossible. As news from Europe grows more dire, the United States’ response becomes more anemic. Joe’s feelings of entrapment and powerlessness grow.

His drawings become metaphors for his predicament. While Joe has some measure of hope, his work “articulate[s] the simple joy of unfettered movement, of the able body, in a way that captured yearnings not only of his crippled cousin but of an entire generation of weaklings, stumblebums, and playground goats” (177). As Joe’s hope dissolves, the Escapist is drawn entrapped in increasingly hopeless situations; increasingly improbable and amazing means are required to rescue him.

The novel takes a turn at this point. Joe takes to venturing into Yorkville, the German-American neighborhood of New York City, looking for trouble. He finds it, in the office of the Aryan-American League, modeled after the very real German-American Bund that existed before and during the War. Breaking in while the office is unoccupied, he is at first puzzled, then stunned to find the desk littered with comics—*Superman* and other superhero comics that had inspired his own creation. He also finds a memo about the “Jew cartoonists” Joe Kavalier and Sam Clay and their “usual Jewish warmongering propaganda.” He is made to confront “the mirror-image

fascism inherent in his anti-fascist superman.” Chabon writes that

Will Eisner, another “Jew cartoonist,” quite deliberately dressed his Allied-hero Blackhawks in uniforms modeled on the elegant death’s head garb of the Waffen SS. But Joe was perhaps the first to feel the shame of glorifying, in the name of democracy and freedom, the vengeful brutality of a very strong man. For months he had been assuring himself, and listening to Sammy’s assurances, that they were hastening, by their make-believe hammering at Haxoff or Hynkel or Hassler or Hitler, the intervention of the United States into the war with Europe. Now it occurred to Joe to wonder if all they had been doing, all along, was indulging their own worst impulses and assuring the creation of another generation of men who revered only strength and domination. (204)

This might be considered a moment of metamorphosis for Joe—not the kind of temporary metamorphosis necessitated by persecution that was alluded to above, but rather a change toward maturity and wisdom.

Joe begins to reconsider the nature and function of magic, as well. He reflects that “the magician seem[s] to promise that something torn to bits might be mended without a seam, that what had vanished might reappear, that a scattered handful of doves or dust might be reunited by a word, that a paper rose consumed by fire could be made to bloom from a pile of ash. But everyone knew that it was only an illusion. The true magic of this broken world lay in the ability of the things it contained to vanish, to become so thoroughly lost, that they might never have existed in the first place” (339). At this point, at least, Chabon appears to have far less sympathy with the

person who turns to magic for solace and hope than Spiegelman does. Whereas for Spiegelman the possibility of magical intervention and rescue hovers over us, for Chabon we are on our own, forced to focus on the real world and to try to save ourselves.

In *Kavalier & Clay* there are no prophecies to encourage Joe to persevere in his efforts to save his family. He learns of his father's death; his mother is lost among the deportations. He tries to make his own miracle—arranging for his younger brother's rescue by ship—but the ship is sunk by a German U-boat. In despair over failing to effect his brother's escape, he sabotages his own escape while performing at a party. Magic is used with the intention of extinguishing, rather than saving, a life.

Joe faces another moral crisis shortly after this. With nothing left to lose, he decides to enlist in the Navy, hoping to engage in real—rather than vicarious—combat. However, he is sent to a remote base in Antarctica, which he views as “the symbol, the embodiment, the blank unmeaning heart of his impotence in this war” (436). There is a tragic accident, and Joe and one other man are the only survivors.

One night he picks up a transmission on his radio—a German documentary announcing the creation of the Theresienstadt Model Ghetto. While listening to a description of the musical events offered there, Josef recognizes the voice of his grandfather, a singer with a distinctive, sweet voice. He realizes that Theresienstadt is no more than “a witch's house made of candy and gingerbread to lure children and fatten them for the table” (442).

He picks up another transmission; it is in German, and it is so clear that Joe realizes that there must be a German serviceman nearby. He is able to confirm his suspicions; the German is a geologist. He fails to report this to Command. Instead,

“the desire for revenge, for a final expiation of guilt and responsibility” (447), impel him to find and destroy the German himself. He manages to convince his sole comrade to go along with his plan. Yet he realizes that “the situation was far from clear. The man they were going to kill had done nothing to harm either of them. He was not a soldier. It was unlikely that he had been involved in any but the most tangential, metaphysical of ways with the building of the witch’s house in Terezin” (453).

The German, it turns out, is “a peaceful and scholarly man who had always deplored violence” (464). He is weak and sick, and rather than kill him, Joe determines to save him. He attempts to carry him back to his station, but his attempt fails. Chabon writes that nothing “had ever broken his heart quite as terribly as the realization . . . that he was hauling a corpse behind him” (465). This is the moment of Joe’s true metamorphosis, and redemption.

Chabon writes of the postwar period as a time when many had lost their taste for violence. The defeat of real-world villains such as Hitler and Tojo had diminished their craving for revenge, as well. Returning soldiers were disinclined to write and draw superhero comic books that glorified both. Joe channels his talents into a graphic novel memorializing the victims of the Holocaust, with the true, undisguised Golem as its hero.

Chabon, through Joe, considers the question of whether fantasy is an appropriate genre for the representation of such a grave subject. He writes movingly, “Having lost his mother, father, brother, and grandfather, the friends and foes of his youth, his beloved teacher Bernard Kornblum, his city, his history—his home—the usual charge leveled against comic books, that they offered *merely an easy escape*

from reality, seemed to Joe actually to be a powerful argument on their behalf. . . .

The escape from reality was, he felt—especially right after the war—a worthy challenge” (575). He recalls relaxing for a moment and reading a comic book during a time when the pain of his losses was always with him. For the brief time it took him to read the comic, the pain vanished. “*That was magic*,” Chabon writes, “not the apparent magic of the silk-hatted card-palmer, or the bold, brute trickery of the escape artist, but the genuine magic of art” (576).

The comic book also is shown to be as valid a vehicle of personal expression as any other medium. In fact, *The Golem* becomes so personal to Joe—such an accurate documentation of his pain and sorrow—that he hesitates to make it public. Chabon then writes of why the golem is an appropriate hero for the post-Holocaust world:

In history and folklore, the significance and the fascination of golems—from Rabbi Loew’s to Victor von Frankenstein’s—lay in their soullessness, in their tireless inhuman strength, in their metaphorical association with overweening human ambition, and in the frightening ease with which they passed beyond the control of their horrified and admiring creators. But it seemed to Joe that none of these—Faustian hubris least of all—were among the true reasons that impelled men, time after time, to hazard the making of golems. The shaping of a golem, to him, was a gesture of hope, offered against hope, in a time of desperation. It was the expression of a yearning that a few magic words and an artful hand might produce something—one poor, dumb,

powerless thing—exempt from the crushing strictures, from the ills, cruelties, and inevitable failures of the greater Creation. It was the voicing of a vain wish, when you got down to it, to escape. To slip, like the Escapist, free of the entangling chain of reality and the straitjacket of physical laws. Harry Houdini had roamed the Palladiums and Hippodromes of the world encumbered by an entire cargo-hold of crates and boxes, stuffed with chains, iron hardware, brightly painted flats and hokum, animated all the while only by this same desire, never fulfilled: truly to escape, if only for one instant; to poke his head through the borders of the world, with its harsh physics, into the mysterious spirit world that lay beyond. (582)

In this passage Chabon articulates a number of the quintessential themes of the Jewish imagination referred to above. There is the persistence of hope. There is the belief in the possibilities of transformation and metamorphosis—of the transformation of a quantity of clay into human form and of the expectation of doom into salvation. And there is the longing for flight—not merely from one geographic point to another, but from the cruelty and injustice of this world.

Joe and Sammy, however, have some reservations about the Golem. He is, after all “awfully Jewish.” Sammy resolves his doubts, reflecting, “they’re all Jewish, superheroes. Superman, you don’t think he’s Jewish? Coming over from the old country, changing his name like that. Clark Kent, only a Jew would pick a name like that for himself” (585). Yet again we see Chabon gently poking fun at Jews—this time at their perhaps over-eager attempts to assimilate. Sammy’s joke illustrates

another characteristic of Chabon's work, as well—the juxtaposition of the high-minded with the ridiculous. Chabon seems to take seriously and personally his statements regarding the need for and the value of escape. The reader is confronted with scenes of hardly bearable personal loss and pain or by serious reflections on cruelty and injustice. Yet these invariably are followed by lighter, even humorous scenes—giving the reader a chance for escape.

Arguably, the farther the Holocaust recedes into history, the more Second- and Third-Generation writers may have to turn to fantasy in order to represent it. Yet not all critics are enthusiastic about Chabon's use of fantasy. Lee Behlman writes that “with superhero comic books, Chabon presents a form of fantasy that resolutely avoids the real, for it seeks to resolve history either by overcoming it through neat, miraculous reversals or by escaping its terms completely” (*Escapist* 3). Later in his essay he refines his objection, stating that fantasy, “no matter how ‘unsentimental’ it may be, can give pleasure to an artist and an audience, and that pleasure may be a distraction from the past” (*Escapist* 7). This is reminiscent of Adorno's famous and frequently misused statement about poetry after Auschwitz. He goes on to worry that fantasy may lead to “the admittedly problematic, quintessentially American phenomenon of forgetting” (*Escapist* 7). (Is forgetting really an American phenomenon?)

Behlman distinguishes between Spiegelman, who, he says, has confronted the taint of triviality imposed on comic books by inventing the term “commix,” and Chabon, who embraces the early comic books, uncomplicated as they might have been. Spiegelman did not use the term “commix” by way of an apology; he was simply calling attention to the form's “co-mix” of words and images. He has never

indicated a disdain for the early examples of the medium.

Fantasy functions in much the same way as humor in *Kavalier & Clay*—and in fact, the novel features both prominently. We might return, once again, to Terrence Des Pres and his “fictions” of Holocaust writing, discussed in Chapter 1 of this dissertation. Des Pres had cited several works that represent the Holocaust in the comic mode and stated that they are, in a way, revolutionary, since “they refuse to take the Holocaust on its own crushing terms” (220). Behlman criticizes Chabon for endorsing a form of fantasy that refuses to take history on its own terms. Might not that, too, be considered a kind of defiance? It must also be noted that Joe struggles throughout the novel with the disparity between fantasy and direct action, and that Chabon is unstinting in his depiction of Joe’s very real pain and grief. Furthermore, it has been pointed out by numerous Holocaust scholars that the events of the Holocaust were so fantastic that fantasy may be an appropriate—if not a superior—genre with which to represent it.

Behlman refers to a review of *Kavalier & Clay* by John Podhoretz in *Commentary*. In it, Podhoretz comments, “the Jews of Central Europe, both those who were murdered and those who escaped murder, were ordinary people. In attempting to memorialize them and pay tribute to their suffering, Chabon descends into a false mysticism. It is true that their tradition featured a certain mystical strain, but it is also horrifyingly true that mysticism was among the forces that led to their extermination—an evil mysticism that promised the world would be purified by their removal” (3). It is unfair to say that Chabon “descends into mysticism.” While he shows respect and affection for Jewish tradition, he never suggests that the Golem will be a real agent of salvation. Podhoretz’s comments about the uses to which the

Nazis put mysticism are interesting and true, but they have nothing to do with the uses to which Chabon puts fantasy and magic.

The most obvious element that *Maus* and *Kavalier & Clay* share is the phenomenon of the comic book. Spiegelman is a comic artist while Chabon writes about one. Chabon writes about comic-book techniques, and we can see these very techniques employed by Spiegelman. Throughout *Kavalier & Clay* Joe struggles to find a style commensurate with his subject. Hillary Chute notes that Joe's most innovative project, *The Golem*, is produced directly after the occasion of his greatest trauma. "In this, Chabon suggests that trauma breaks the boundaries of form, mutating the very shape of representation," she writes ("Ragtime" 286). She compares *The Golem* with *Maus*, using a quotation from *Kavalier & Clay*; the passage in the latter reads: "All of the grief and black wonder that he was never able to express, before or afterward . . . all of it went into the queasy angles and stark compositions, the cross-hatchings and vast swaths of shadow, the distended and fractured and finely minced panels of his monstrous comic book" (578). *Maus* is just such a "monstrous comic book"; Art represents the Holocaust in much the same way as Joe does. Both Spiegelman and Chabon affirm that the comic book is an appropriate, even an especially well-suited genre with which to represent this horrific event.

Thane Rosenbaum does not write or illustrate comic books—nor does he indicate any particular interest in them. But he is a member of the Second Generation—a fact his readers are seldom allowed to forget. His Holocaust trilogy—*Elijah Visible*, *Second Hand Smoke*, and *The Golems of Gotham*—are all works of

fiction, but a look at the facts of his life suggests that they are largely autobiographical. Rosenbaum's parents were both Holocaust survivors. His mother was interned at Maidanek, and his father was held prisoner at various camps, including Bergen-Belsen. After the war, the family immigrated to the United States. Rosenbaum spent the first nine years of his life in Washington Heights, in Manhattan. The family then relocated to Miami Beach (Furman, "Thane" 1021).

As Tolstoy famously noted, each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. While the Spiegelmans and the Rosenbaums suffered through similar circumstances, they were affected by them in different ways. Likewise, the sons were affected by their parents in different ways, and they reacted to them differently, as well. Surely, *Maus* is more autobiographical than any of Rosenbaum's works of fiction. Furthermore, in the first work in his trilogy—*Elijah Visible*, a collection of short stories—the character that appears to represent Rosenbaum changes identity continuously. He always has the same name—Adam Posner—but he is represented variously as a lawyer, a painter, a student, a teacher, and a child. He may be found in any one of a number of locations. Andrew Furman notes that Adam Posner may be considered “a mosaic figure to capture the complex, nuanced, and, above all, fractured existence of the Holocaust survivor's child in America.” He notes further that “the name Adam suggests rebirth or regeneration, and throughout the collection Rosenbaum scrutinizes the possibility of such continuity” (“Thane” 1022). But whatever his name and wherever he may be, there is one constant: he is “consumed by the Holocaust as a defining, psychologically altering event” (Pinsker 284).

In the first story of the collection, evocatively titled “Cattle Car Complex,” Adam is a lawyer leaving his office late one night. He becomes trapped in an elevator

and experiences an increasingly severe panic attack. Rosenbaum notes, “Above all else he wanted to feel safe” (4). This is a common and understandable concern among children of survivors. We learn that Adam’s parents had been transported to the camps in cattle cars. Like Art, Adam is a secondhand witness—traumatized by received testimony. Trapped in an elevator, he behaves as a traumatized person would.

Adam’s parents had survived, but they had never directly discussed their experiences with him. Yet he has an understanding of what had taken place. Rosenbaum remarks, “It was unavoidable. The legacy that flowed through his veins. Parental reminiscences had become the genetic material that was to be passed on by survivors to their children. . . . Adam had often heard the screams of his parents at night. Their own terrible visions from a haunted past became his” (5).

Spiegelman, too, had heard his parents screaming in the night; he remembers assuming that everyone’s parents did that. Like Spiegelman, Rosenbaum experiences postmemory, discussed above. He seems to experience it even more intensely than Spiegelman. The idea of memory as “genetic material” appears in other works by Rosenbaum, as well. In another story in *Elijah Visible*, “An Act of Defiance,” another version of Adam Posner is conversing with his Uncle Haskell. Haskell states, in reference to Adam’s survivor father, “Your father had an excuse for his suffering. What reason do you have to carry these sins around like bricks?” “I have no choice,” Adam replies. “It’s called legacy. The Holocaust survivor in me was passed on through the genes. Who knows how many generations it will take to cancel this virus from our blood?” (63).

One is led to wonder whether Rosenbaum truly believes that one’s very DNA

can be altered by one's parents' memories. If he does, he apparently is not alone. Leon I. Yudkin makes the startling claim, "It seems that just as there is genetic transmission of characteristics, there is also genetic transmission of experiences." He goes on, "James Herzog raises the question, 'How does what the parent endured or escaped make its way into the child's mind?' . . . If the survivors themselves do not talk of what has happened, how is this material absorbed by the child? Here, there are two possibilities. One is unconscious transmission, *through the genes* [italics mine], which now hold the traumatized material. The other is indirect transmission through other means" (172). Holocaust scholar Alan Berger seems to endorse Yudkin's position.

Rosenbaum does acknowledge the role of imagination in the Second Generation's relation to their parents' experiences. In "An Act of Defiance," Adam articulates his generation's dilemma: "I had created my own ghosts from memories that were not mine. I wasn't there, in Poland, among the true martyrs. Everything about my rage was borrowed. My imagination had done all the work—invented suffering, without the physical scars, the incontestable proof" (59).

Such concepts as postmemory, the genetic transmission of trauma, and secondhand witnessing have acted as lightning rods for critics. Gary Weissman's criticism has been especially well thought out and persuasive. In his book *Fantasies of Witnessing*, he writes of the seemingly perverse desire among some nonwitnesses actually to have experienced the Holocaust. This desire can be realized only in fantasy—hence the title of his book. In one particularly memorable passage, he expresses his dissatisfaction with Lawrence L. Langer's *Holocaust Testimonies*, writing, "I thought it was marred by the author's competitive relation to survivors: he

seemed to resent those who had not learned what *he felt* they should have learned from going through the Holocaust. It was as if the literary critic . . . wished to have for himself the experience of the Holocaust that had been wasted on them” (26).

Weissman addresses “Cattle Car Complex” critically but not sarcastically, writing “Rosenbaum’s story strikes me as a romantic fantasy staging the second-generation American Jew’s transformation into full-fledged Holocaust victim” (15).

Weissman challenges Hirsch’s concept of postmemory, taking special exception to her claim that although she can only imagine the world her Holocaust-survivor parents emerged from, her imaginings are “no less present, no less vivid, and perhaps because of the constructed and deeply invested nature of memory itself, no less accurate” than her parents’ memories (qtd. in Weissman 16). In fact, Hirsch does seem to have crossed a line with this statement. Her imaginings cannot be “present”; she, herself, was not present at the site of her parents’ trauma. Neither can imagination be more “accurate” than memory, although it can contribute to our understanding of an event in other, valuable ways. To Weissman, there is no memory involved in postmemory. He writes, “no degree of power or monumentality can transform one person’s lived memories into another’s” (17).

He notes that such phenomena as remembrance, commemoration, historical consciousness, awareness, and history are now confused with memory (101). So is imagination. Holocaust literature, he further notes, “is far better at helping us ‘remember it’ when what we want to remember is not the Holocaust as historical event, but *what it was like* to experience the Holocaust as a victim” (104). Finally, he cautions that sympathy—wishing to share another’s feelings—may lead to “treading a thin line between compassion and appropriation” (110).

The experiences of survivors of the Holocaust inevitably affect their behavior toward their children, no matter how those experiences are remembered. The burden that these memories place on the Second Generation is a chief focus of Rosenbaum's work. In "Cattle Car Complex," Rosenbaum notes Adam's claustrophobia and intense fear of the dark, writing, "At crowded parties he always kept close to the door, stationed at the exit, where there was air, where he knew he could get out" (6). Depression is ever present. In "An Act of Defiance" Haskell gently advises Adam, "'there is a sadness in you that you won't let go. You must let it go'" (80).

Parents often add to their children's anxiety by keeping silent about the past. This silence drives "The Pants in the Family," in which the unnamed child narrator, speaking of his father, confesses, "I wanted to know more about what had happened to him during the war. It was always such an impenetrable secret—my parents, speaking in code, changing the passwords repeatedly, keeping me off the scent" (48).

The most blatantly dysfunctional family portrayed in *Elijah Visible* appears in "The Little Blue Snowman of Washington Heights." In this story, Adam is a child. Rosenbaum presents the kind of conversation that, we are given to believe, takes place routinely in Adam's family:

"Look out for the bad men."

"What bad men?"

"One day they will come to get you."

"Who are they?"

"You won't know until they come."

"How will I know? Tell me who they are."

"That's for you to learn, but get them before they get you." (191)

The story begins in Adam's kindergarten classroom. We learn that he loves listening to stories, although he is suspicious of happy endings. Rosenbaum writes:

He had his own stories, although he wasn't about
to tell any of them. Why frighten his companions
in kindergarten? So needless, and they so innocent.
And who would want to hear these stories, anyway?
Who would believe? After all, there was nothing made
up or make-believe about what Adam would say—even
if he dared say. His stories were real, the endings
monstrous. And he was sworn to secrecy. (192)

This Adam comes from a family within which too much is said, rather than too little.

Before dismissal, a snowstorm arrives. Rosenbaum describes the hilly streets with steep drops that crisscross Washington Heights. He calls out the menacing gargoyles that appear on the facades of the dark, gothic buildings, "staring down on all those brooding German immigrants passing below" (197). He reveals that the teacher is aware of Adam's parents' Holocaust past, and that she is aware, too, that "now their son seemed to know the horror, as though he had been with them—the entire experience coded in his brain, forever" (197). She recalls a trip that the class had taken to a police station. Adam had not wanted to go, but he had been made to. "Instinctively, Adam knew to be on guard. Police were not to be trusted. They weren't necessarily the good guys; they didn't protect everyone. Adam also knew the transformative power of a uniform. . . . The precinct was filled with so much potential for abuse and injustice; he wanted, in some small way, to right the imbalance" (198). He attempts to do this by creating havoc.

After having left the police precinct, the teacher had reflected on Adam's family. "They were unlike the other German Jews she had known from the neighborhood. Much more nervous, jagged, over the edge" (199). At a conference, Adam's mother had told the teacher that she and her husband had hoped to send Adam to kindergarten at a military school so he might learn "what goes on in such places" (199). On one occasion, he had had an anxiety attack at school and gone to the nurse's office. The nurse had called his mother, who had looked at him disapprovingly and said, "Adam, we cannot have such nonsense. You must be stronger. This cannot go on. What if something were to happen to us? What would you do? Hold on to the nurse's dress? She will not be there for you. She is nice, but she is a stranger" (200).

The story approaches its climax as the teacher prepares the class for dismissal. Each child is supposed to be released to a parent. It is now that Rosenbaum reveals the full extent of what he memorably calls the Posners' "commando parenting." "Not showing up on time after school was one of their little tests, devised to gauge their son's instincts for survival. Could he make it home by himself? What if something were to happen to them? They had long ago warned him about the precariousness of life, and the possibilities—no, the certainties—of their imminent deaths" (201-02). The Posners do not show up to claim Adam. He wants to get on the bus, but "the bus wasn't part of the plan, not the scheduled escape route. Such an improvised, unrehearsed maneuver was unthinkable" (203). He is able to sneak away from his teacher and make his way home through the storm. Once there, he finds, in his parents' bedroom, "two naked bodies . . . shuddering in the darkness. Two pairs of terrorized eyes—the withering remains of the master race" (205).

This story portrays a very different family from the one Spiegelman portrays in *Maus*. As noted above, Adam's parents communicated far too much of their history to Adam. It has been said that especially in cases such as this, "the burden of memory [is] a 'glass hat' . . . weighing down the children of survivors and invisibly setting them apart from their contemporaries" (Sicher, "Shadow" 174). The metaphor of the glass hat comes from the title of a story collection by Navah Semel. Efraim Sicher notes a communication gap in such families not only between the parents and children, but between the parents and the rest of the world, as well.

Art's life had been shaped by Anja's overwhelming depression and Vladek's self-absorption. Adam's life is shaped by paranoia. The families in Rosenbaum's stories and novels are often atypical of those that appear in other works of Holocaust fiction—angrier and more calloused. His characters, in such stories as "Cattle Car Complex" and "The Little Blue Snowman," are likely to be severely damaged, and his plots sometimes strain credulity. Still, these works have an unusual power that conveys the extreme trauma suffered by survivors and its repercussions for their offspring in an especially effective way.

In his aptly titled novel *Second Hand Smoke*, Rosenbaum revisits many of the themes found in *Elijah Visible*. Yet whereas the stories in *Elijah Visible* are uniformly dark, Rosenbaum allows some irony and humor to seep into *Second Hand Smoke*. He makes sure from the outset that we understand that his protagonist, Duncan Katz, is "a child of trauma. Not of love, or happiness, or exceptional wealth. Just trauma. And nightmare, too" (1). Yet he also refers to Duncan as "a one-man, walking *yohrzeit*" (145).

Rosenbaum writes of Duncan's damaged parents, of his inherited trauma, and

of the secondhand nature of his testimony. In recognition of “the residual deformities and fractures that litter post-Holocaust experience,” Rosenbaum has departed from linear narrative in *Second Hand Smoke*. Present moments are continuously interrupted by memories of past moments; there are generally no transitions to smooth the way (Burstein 2).

Duncan lives with his survivor parents, Yankee and Mila, in Miami Beach. The Katzes resemble the Posners of “The Little Blue Snowman of Washington Heights”; paranoia reigns here, too. The Katzes are oddly named, and that is no accident. Rosenbaum writes that the “strategic obsession with names was a fact of life for the Katzes. Everything was in the service of deception” (5). Names were aliases, easily discarded when necessary. Duncan’s father, Yankee, born Herschel, had named himself after the baseball team. He wanted “to lose himself in something foreign”; he imagined that with such a name, he would be “virtually untraceable and unknowable, even to himself” (6). Duncan’s mother had kept her original name, because “a name change alone would not have been enough. . . . The Katzes had constructed an entire vocabulary around the mixed message, the obscure reference. Suspicions lurked everywhere. . . . The family radar beeped at frequencies that were out of range for most people. High-pitched warnings, like tocsins, that came often and hummed throughout the day; the sirens announcing the end of the world, heard only by those blessed with madness” (6-7). This family literally speaks in code; if one member should inadvertently reveal too much, he is reprimanded with the secret word: *keller*. Duncan often feels that he, himself, “may have been born into the family, but . . . never accepted into its inner circle” (8).

Having learned that the law is not necessarily on the side of justice, Mila has

become involved in the world of organized crime in Miami. Having survived an environment meant to kill her, she is referred to by Rosenbaum as “a poster child for Charles Darwin” (11). As Janet Burstein has noted, Mila “reconfigures our image of the destructive Jewish mother” (1). She also concedes that Mila is merely doing what all parents do—passing on what her own experiences have taught her; it is not her fault that her experiences have been so grotesque.

Duncan grows up to become a lawyer for the OSI (Office of Special Investigations), within the Department of Justice. His job is to track down Nazi war criminals and bring them to justice. He performs it with terrifying zeal. The wish to avenge their parents’ suffering is not uncommon among the Second Generation. It can find expression in acts of revenge or in attempts to “‘undo’ the evil by seeking a *tikkun* (repair) of the self and the world” (Berger, “Mourning” 6). *Second Hand Smoke* is largely the story of Duncan’s growth from an avenger to a repairer.

Mila never makes that leap. Like the Posners in “The Little Blue Snowman,” she is a practitioner of commando parenting. She sends Duncan to karate classes, urging him to do whatever is necessary to beat his opponents; she has to withdraw him when the teacher informs her, “‘I’m not carrying enough insurance for you. My policy doesn’t cover acts of war’” (30). As if in homage to Spiegelman and Chabon, Rosenbaum writes, “Capeless and without a cowl, or even a phone booth, Duncan knew that what his mother really wanted was not a son, but a comic-book superhero” (32). He also refers to Duncan as “a modern-day golem from Miami Beach who could defend any Jewish ghetto anywhere, anytime” (36).

We learn that Duncan was discouraged by Mila from introspection. “Reflection only leads to paralysis, and paralysis of any kind can only slow down

getaways, cause missions to abort, thwart spontaneous decision-making” (73).

Similarly, he was urged to avoid intimacy. He marries and has a child, but the marriage ends in divorce. His wife tells him that she must leave so that she can have a chance to be a survivor, too—of Duncan and his Holocaust legacy.

Halfway through the book Duncan learns that he has a half-brother in Poland, abandoned by Mila as an infant after the war. Thus, like Art Spiegelman, he has a “ghost brother.” He determines to visit him there, with the intention of seeking vengeance and “taking back their birthrights.” But his brother, Isaac, is Duncan’s opposite—a spiritualistic yoga instructor. Duncan’s other major disappointment is that there is no satisfactory gym in all of Warsaw, and after all, “‘Nobody is going to be intimidated by two deep-breathing brothers’” (212). Alan Berger suggests that the character of Isaac reflects not only eastern spirituality but Jewish mystical tradition, as well. The thirteenth-century Jewish mystic and kabbalah proponent Abraham Abulafia encouraged yoga-like practices, including deep breathing, in order to achieve communion with God.

Berger also sees significance in the fact that Duncan undertakes his journey at the age of forty. Forty is an important number in Judaism. The Israelites wandered in the desert for forty years before they could enter the Promised Land; during this time, they were purified. Berger points out that Duncan’s Holocaust legacy had thrust him into a psychological wilderness. God’s words to Abraham, “*Lech Lecha*,”—“Get thee to a far country”—have been interpreted as “Get thee deeper into thyself.” Duncan’s journey culminates in self-understanding (*tikkun atzmi*)—a prerequisite for attempting to heal the world (*tikkun olam*) (“Mourning” 13).

Isaac works at a Jewish cemetery, and he tells Duncan: “I can feel the ghosts

around me every day, but they don't call out my name; they don't wish me the same fate. I am not in exile, and I won't live in darkness. That's why I tell all of my students to live a spiritual life—to stay grounded and in this world” (214). Yet shortly after hearing this, Duncan experiences a moment of magic. “Near the edge of the park was a fenced-in section that housed the long stilted poles of a swing set. The chains were unworkably rusted, yet Duncan noticed that each basket was moving forward and backward—noisily, unrhythmically, and unoccupied. Twelve empty swings rocking all by themselves . . . rocking the ghosts of Jewish children at unfinished play” (216-17). The next page, which opens the next chapter, finds Duncan pushing his daughter on a swing, linking the ghosts of the murdered Jewish children with the Third Generation.

Berger notes that Isaac is connected to the spiritual world through his special mantra: “one-oh-one-six-eight-two.” This is the number that had been tattooed onto Mila's arm at Auschwitz. The sum of the numbers is 18—the numerical equivalent of *Hai*, the Hebrew word for life. (He also notes that whether by intention or accident, there are 18 chapters in *Second Hand Smoke*.) The name Isaac is significant; Elie Wiesel has called the biblical Isaac the “first survivor in Jewish history.” Rosenbaum's Isaac is the son of survivors, and he, himself, has survived Mila's abandonment and abuse and begun the process of *tikkun*—repairing or healing. The name Isaac means “to laugh” in Hebrew. Berger writes, “Isaac frequently laughs and teaches Duncan the healing power of laughter, which is itself a type of rebellion against injustice” (“Mourning” 11).

Duncan is informed that there are neo-Nazis in Poland. Rosenbaum writes, “Duncan seemed pleased by this piece of news. ‘Neo-Nazis?’ he asked, as though

Silver had just brought out a birthday cake” (231). This is Rosenbaum at both his most dysfunctional and his most engaging. It is also a perfect example of self-deprecating Jewish humor. He is one of the rare members of the Second Generation who can take a reasonably objective look at himself and laugh at what he sees.

Horror follows humor in a pivotal flashback scene that follows. We read of Mila, after liberation, going to the jewelry shop owned by Keller Borowski—the man who is to bring up Isaac. Keller had been a master engraver before the war, and when the Russians had arrived at Auschwitz, he had stolen one of the tattooing instruments as a “reparation.” She leaves the shop and goes to the infant Isaac. She gives him leftover Passover wine to drink. She picks up the instrument, which Rosenbaum writes looked like a “*yad*, which is used when reading from the Torah to make sure that the reader doesn’t accidentally place human flesh against sheepskin” (238). She proceeds to tattoo Isaac with her Auschwitz number. “How else could she ensure that he would know something of the nightmare?” Rosenbaum writes. “The numbers were all that he needed to know” (240).

To Berger, the branding of Isaac in *Second Hand Smoke* is akin to the biblical binding of Isaac. He notes that Rosenbaum uses biblical and mystical motifs to portray the degrees of both rupture and continuity between pre- and post-Auschwitz Jewish identity. The binding of Isaac (*akedah*) symbolized the degree to which Abraham was willing to go to express his fidelity to the covenant. Mila assumes Abraham’s role in *Second Hand Smoke*. In the Bible Isaac is spared, and the continuity of the covenant is guaranteed. During the Holocaust, however, as Berger writes, “there was an anti-*akedah* repeated a million and a half times” (65). There was no angel to intercede for the murdered Jewish children, nor were there rams to take

their places; the dying Mila screams out, “‘Akedah, Akedah! There is no ram!’”

Berger suggests that Rosenbaum is expressing the thought that the branding of the Jews during the Holocaust was a hideous parody of the biblical binding of Isaac (“Mourning” 13).

As Duncan’s visit to Poland progresses he reaches a point at which he is moved to articulate the anguish of postmemory: “‘I’m caught in a time warp, trapped in a cattle car. Everything is about loss. It feels like there is no difference between my life and what happened to our family during the war’” (263). On the other hand, he cannot help noticing that his brother, who carries no bitterness or anger, is leading a far happier, more productive life. Over time, Duncan learns to let go and forgive; a new connection to Judaism—one separate from the Holocaust—helps him to achieve redemption.

Hamida Bosmajian has pointed out that Art Spiegelman, in *Maus*, “‘frequently depicts himself in infantile attitudes and postures; petulance, anger, sulkiness, self-pity and ingratiating gestures signal the need for the acknowledgement he failed and fails to receive’” (30). Rosenbaum depicts Duncan similarly—verbally, if not visually. Ingratiating gestures, however, are not part of Duncan’s repertoire. At least initially, he reacts to his feelings of loss and abandonment with barely contained rage.

Berger recognizes three stages to Duncan’s response to his Holocaust legacy; all three are typical of the Second Generation. The first is one of mourning, in which the child of survivors is paralyzed by postmemory and feelings of helplessness. Rosenbaum describes those at this stage as being victims of “‘a Final Solution that had no end’” (83). In the second stage, which may overlap with the first, rage and hatred replace helplessness. These feelings motivate a desire to act, but the actions taken are

often self-destructive. Rosenbaum illustrates this kind of action in a painful but hilarious scene in which Duncan attacks a Mercedes parked on the street because of its German origins. “Before too long, the Mercedes had been reduced to a Schwinn” (154). Berger illustrates the kind of destructive or self-destructive action typical of the second stage with a scene in which Duncan runs amok in a Polish gift shop. The shop sells souvenirs that Duncan feels trivialize the Holocaust. To Berger, this scene echoes both Abraham’s destruction of Terah’s idols and Jeremiah’s shattering of a clay flask in the Valley of Hinnom (“Mourning” 11). The third stage is an attempt to heal oneself and to at least partially heal the world, in hope of achieving redemption (“Mourning” 8).

The novel that completes Rosenbaum’s Holocaust trilogy, *The Golems of Gotham*, also features a protagonist, Oliver Levin, coping with a Holocaust legacy. Yet it considers the legacy that the Holocaust left to the world as much as to this one individual. Rosenbaum’s novel fits squarely within the genre of magic realism, although he hedges on the last page—suggesting that the magical elements of the narrative were part of a made-up story Oliver had told to his daughter.

The Golems of Gotham starts with a bit of black humor. In a flashback, it recounts the day when Oliver’s parents, Holocaust survivors Lothar and Rose, fulfill a suicide pact while at Shabbat services—“not exactly what God had in mind for his day of rest” (3). They did this having “outlived the shootings, the typhus, and the death marches. All their relatives were dead, even the no-good distant cousins who all of a sudden were longingly missed” (31).

The action soon jumps to Zabar’s, on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Ariel Levin, Oliver’s daughter, is playing on the street to an audience including

children, “gap-toothed, Gap-clothed” (11). She is brilliantly performing klezmer on the violin—although she has never taken lessons or shown any musical talent. Ariel is worried about her father, who describes himself as “haunted by loss” (32). She, herself, is aware that for the Levins, the Holocaust is “not in the past.” She articulates a sentiment familiar within survivor families: “For my family the Holocaust is always present and real even though it happened a long time ago, even though we never speak about it” (42).

In Hebrew school, Ariel has learned the story of Rabbi Loew and the Golem of Prague. It inspires her to attempt to resurrect Oliver’s parents as golems made from Hudson River clay. Her hope is that they will help Oliver to work through his depression. She succeeds in summoning more than her grandparents. One night during the Christmas season, Oliver is having dinner with his agent at Tavern on the Green. He looks up and, as the orchestra plays “Strangers in the Night,” he witnesses ghosts in the trees. They are wearing concentration camp uniforms. We learn that they are the ghosts of writers who, like Oliver’s parents, had survived the camps only to commit suicide later: Primo Levi, Jerzy Kosinski, Tadeusz Borowski, Paul Celan, Jean Amery, and Piotr Rawicz. Before continuing with his story, Rosenbaum offers a brief sketch of each writer. The idea of having tortured and traumatized writers brought back to life may seem like a shameless gimmick at first—especially in a book concerned with the appropriate memorialization of the Holocaust’s victims. Yet Rosenbaum represents these golems with obvious respect and affection.

This is not to suggest that he abandons his dark sense of humor. When Oliver discovers his parents’ ghosts, they are hiding in the shower of his apartment. ““Where better for us to hide?”” they ask; ““Who knows more about showers than we do?””

(73). ““We will all be living here for a while,”” they announce. ““Living? But you’re all dead,”” Oliver replies (80). Drawing from the black-humor repertoire of responses to horror, Rosenbaum aims to subvert pain with jokes. He is clearly well aware of the magnitude of the horrors that occurred during the Holocaust. Yet he refuses to accept the “fiction” that Des Pres had written of that dictates that only the most solemn tone is appropriate to the representation of these horrors. He understands Des Pres’s comments that “laughter is hostile to the world it depicts” (219) and that works written in the comic mode can be especially effective because “they refuse to take the Holocaust on its own crushing terms” (220).

The golems tell Oliver that the memory of the Holocaust is receding and that the world seems to have learned nothing from the event. They aim to refresh the world’s memory, and warn that “sometimes words are not enough” (81). They start with harmless acts of mischief and magic. Tattoos disappear from the bodies of New Yorkers, as do crew cuts and shaved heads. Showers cease to work. The stripes disappear from the Yankees’ uniforms and from the zebras in the Bronx Zoo. Tooth fillings transmute from porcelain to gold. The practice of smoking ends; what all the warnings from the scientific community had failed to accomplish, the golems “pulled off in one lucky strike” (100). Chimneys become detached from fireplaces, and flues are shut down. Con Edison switches from gas to electric. The doors on subway cars close automatically when all the seats are taken—no more standing in packed trains. Rawicz, invisible, walks the streets pushing Ariel’s old empty baby carriage; he is grieving for his murdered children, and though he is invisible, his sobs are audible.

The golems enact positive changes, as well. The Jewish life that once had flourished on the Lower East Side moves uptown and westward. “Nobody was

anonymous, or godless, anymore”(103). Ariel, with her klezmer violin, becomes a pop-culture phenomenon. Rosenbaum writes that “best of all, the listeners of her music, and those who joined the caravan to Zabar’s, were not all Jews. The shtetl, which the world had once reviled, revolted against, ransacked, annihilated, mocked, and sentimentalized, had now become everybody’s home town” (231).

Still, over time the golems come to understand that they have underestimated the extent of the forgetting, denying, trivializing, and misrepresenting that has taken place. Celan refers to “the debasement of all that we lived through and ultimately died for” (309). They ponder a way to remedy the situation. Amery, arguably the most combative while alive, states, “The human species only knows how to listen to rage, and outrage. They don’t pay attention unless they are faced with violence, irrational acts, property damage” (309). What ensues is a reenactment of Kristallnacht. Rosenbaum reminds the reader that the story of the Golem of Prague, too, had ended in a full-scale riot.

By the book’s conclusion, the golems have accomplished their original mission, which was twofold: to help the world remember and to help Oliver “move on.” ““But moving on is the enemy of remembering,”” Oliver cries. ““And not moving on is the enemy of life,”” Levi replies (366). The *Golems of Gotham* addresses many of the same themes as *Elijah Visible* and *Second Hand Smoke*: the impermanence of memory, the corruption of memory through popular culture, and the legacy of the Holocaust for subsequent generations. Yet along with regret and anger, Rosenbaum manages to infuse this book with considerable beauty—a feat of magic in itself. One memorable scene has the invisible golems engaged in a playful snowball fight outside of Tavern on the Green. Huddled against the window, the guests look out

past the Christmas lights in the garden, over toward the Sheep Meadow, and witness seemingly self-propelled, perfectly round, hard, white snowballs traveling at varying speeds, with alternating arcs.

Beauty, magic, and playful humor in no way compromise Rosenbaum's message. He is, in fact, uncompromising in his insistence that the Holocaust and its victims be remembered truthfully and respectfully. His portrayal of the golems, with all their flaws and idiosyncrasies, is a rueful reminder of all that was lost. His humor is a reminder that life goes on, and that we have an obligation to live it with decency and kindness.

It might be argued that Rosenbaum's use of fantasy is self-defeating—that his flights of imagination take him and his readers so far from reality that it becomes difficult to look back and reflect. There are a number of counterarguments to be made in Rosenbaum's defense. One—which has been put forth at several points in this dissertation—is that other than memoir, fantasy may be the only genre commensurate with the subject of the Holocaust. The historical event was so fantastic in nature that realistic representation may fall short. This is the reason, presumably, that so many writers on the subject have felt compelled to incorporate fantastic elements into their work, including almost all of the writers discussed or alluded to in this dissertation—Vonnegut, Epstein, Appelfeld, Weisel, Spiegelman, and Chabon.

Fantasy, in addition to offering another level of understanding, also operates as a safety valve, allowing relief from the built-up tension of contemplating horror. Such relief may allow for more focused contemplation. The distance gained from a flight of imagination may, in fact, offer a better perspective from which to view a subject clearly.

A fantastic representation may be thought of as an act of defiance, as noted above. It is an indication of an artist's attempt to master his subject and depict it in any way he chooses. Rosenbaum is nothing if not defiant. It is the provocative, confrontational nature of his work that we relate to and remember most vividly. His pain seems real. His anger, as well as his humor, sometimes verge on hysteria—which he usually manages to rein in before losing control of his work. Still, we are moved by his willingness to go so close to the edge. Within his Holocaust trilogy, there is much that is fantastic, but nothing that is fake.

Inevitably, pain and rage characterize the Second Generation's response to the trauma suffered by the generation before them. Oliver Levin, in *The Golems of Gotham*, explains to his agent why, though no publisher is interested in his Holocaust manuscript, the Holocaust is worthy of study:

The Holocaust is an omnibus curriculum. Manna from the universe. The ultimate tree of knowledge. Food for thought with all the versatility of tofu. It's all there. Psychology, philosophy, theology, chemistry, art, medicine, law. You want to know about life, you want to know about death, you want to know about humanity—you want to know inhumanity—you study the Holocaust. You want to know Yiddish; you want to know what happened to Yiddish? It's that simple: The Holocaust is encyclopedic in its vastness and complexity. Breathe in its fumes and you stand a good chance of being a better human being, unlike what happened to those who inhaled the original Zyklon B,

and lost everything about what it means to be human altogether. (265-66)

In this passage Rosenbaum, an attorney by profession, has presented a perfect argument—thoughtful, comprehensive, and well modulated.

Now let us compare Rosenbaum's words to those of Melvin Jules Bukiet, also a child of Holocaust survivors, in the Introduction to his anthology of Second-Generation writings, *Nothing Makes You Free*: "It's a historic Rorschach blot: people can see in it what they wish. If you're depressive, you can justify despair. If you're hopeful, you can find redemption. If you're stupid, you can discern the triumph of the spirit" (15). In Bukiet's last sentence, we detect a breakdown in his ability, or willingness, to control his rage. The breakdown accelerates when he approaches an explanation for the Holocaust:

The only reason the Germans killed the Jews was because they wanted to. Why? Because. Because they were poor or because they were rich. Because they were clannish and isolated or because they wore top hats and attended the opera. Because their tailors and seamstresses were spiritual unworldly wraiths or because their bankers and journalists insidiously plotted to dominate the world from within the corridors of power. Because they did not believe in the common deity or because they did believe in their own tribal God. Because they drank the blood of Christian children. Because, like Everest, they were there. Because. (17)

Compared to Bukiet, Rosenbaum now sounds like the embodiment of restraint.

Bukiet goes on to highlight the differences between the literature of the survivors and that of their descendants. He begins by pointing out that while the survivors were influenced by rabbinical tales, their descendants were more likely to have been influenced by modernists such as Joyce and Proust. He then states that even those survivor works that purport to be fiction skirt the boundaries of memoir. He comments, “They have no need to imagine; we have no option but to imagine” (21).

He continues, “In imagining, a particular tone bleeds through in all but the mildest of Second Generation writers. Though often literally exuberant and sometimes ‘experimental,’ they are viciously unredemptive, scoured of weakness as they look atrocity straight in the face with barely contained rage. . . . Instead of closure the writers prefer the open wound” (22). He explains this by suggesting that while recollection leads to sorrow, reflection leads to outrage; he concludes with an indictment of Germany, past and present, in which he shocks even himself.

Spiegelman, Chabon, and Rosenbaum—three voices that offer insights into the Holocaust and its aftermath that are unique to the Second Generation. They illuminate the transmission of memory, and they reveal the consequences of trauma for the children of its victims. Spiegelman, in particular, has been compared to the poet Paul Celan in that both created a symbolic language for representing the Holocaust that did not exist before (Cory 39). All three fearlessly confront horror, and all three refuse to promise that redemption somehow will grow out of that horror. The passage of time allowed all three to include humor among their responses to the Holocaust. And all three recognize that where laughter can’t help, a little magic can’t hurt.

Chapter 6

From Idealism to Audacity: Five Holocaust Film Comedies

The ultimate fusion of word and image occurs in films. Films claim our attention and arouse our emotions with an immediacy and an intensity that are, arguably, impossible to duplicate in any other medium. One would think that writers, producers, and directors of the 1930s who recognized the threat building in Europe would have been eager to make films that would expose that threat and help to avert an unprecedented tragedy. Sadly, this was not the case.

Many of the Hollywood filmmakers of that era were German and Austrian Jewish émigrés. It was European anti-Semitism that had driven them to the United States, yet they were rarely if ever moved to allude to that phenomenon in their work. They did not wish to call attention to themselves as Jews—different from the “typical” Americans they featured in their films (Gold 193).

There were also practical reasons for their reluctance to focus on events in Europe. Germany constituted a significant market for American films. The studios had agents there promoting them. After an agent for Warner Bros. was murdered by the Nazis, that studio considered producing a film that addressed the looming Nazi threat. However, American isolationism and anti-Semitism ensured that such a project would fail to attract a big audience at home, and they were discouraged from proceeding. When the British entered the war in 1939, Ambassador Joseph Kennedy went to Hollywood and warned the studios to avoid anti-Nazi propaganda, stating that what was occurring was “Europe’s war” (Gold 193).

One man—Charlie Chaplin—refused to be intimidated by the studios, the government, or anti-Semites at home or abroad. He demonstrated his indifference to

their fears and prejudices with the release of *The Great Dictator* in 1940. Much intrigue surrounds Chaplin's ethnicity. He, himself, declined to comment on rumors that he was Jewish; he believed that to answer the question "Are you a Jew?" was to yield to anti-Semitism (Bathrick, "Cinematic" 158). The Nazis, however, seem to have been convinced of his Jewishness. They banned his films in 1933. In 1937 they staged an exhibition in Munich entitled *The Eternal Jew*, which included numerous pictures of Chaplin dressed as his little tramp character. Book and film versions of *The Eternal Jew* followed, each including images of Chaplin. The 70-minute film was personally organized and overseen by Goebbels (Bathrick, "Cinematic" 158).

A biography of Winston Churchill written by Walter Persich and published in Berlin in 1940 describes a meeting between Churchill and Chaplin. The passage is illustrative of the Nazi hatred of Chaplin and the people he was assumed to represent:

What is Chaplin known for? For his depiction of the run down [sic] type, everywhere in the way and nevertheless by virtue of his slyness, which one would never have expected of such an unimposing little guy, managing to pull it all off. He even out tricks [sic] powerful brutes twice his size, dupes them, grins, take [sic] their money, their girl, their car, plays the noble guy at their house—always at the expense of someone else. His face never betrays the slightest human emotion. Only the eyes in this face appear to be alive. And they are in control of two expressions: on the one hand, an incredibly inwardly concentrated hate; and opposed to that, masked as harmlessness, an obsequious, almost dog like [sic] whimper to

the tune of: “Don’t touch me, I am so small.” Through all of his films Charlie Chaplin wanders with wide splayed [sic] toes in the genuine waddle of the flatfooted wanderer of the desert, who can never deny his race. He underlines these characteristics, molds them into the grotesque. And no matter how much he goes about cheating people, in the end he will always mime the pitied one, who has nothing, is nothing and like the eternal Jew must continue his wandering anywhere and everywhere, into infinity, into nothingness. (qtd. in Bathrick, “Cinematic” 158-59)

The Nazis even concluded that Chaplin had been born in Galicia and that his name originally had been Israel Thonstein (Bathrick, “Cinematic” 159). Chaplin had no patience with such sentiments, declaring later in his autobiography, “I was determined to ridicule [the Nazis’] mystic bilge about a pure-blooded race. As though such a thing ever existed outside of Australian Aborigines!” (qtd. in Gold 196).

Chaplin was no stranger to political activism. During World War I he had participated in rallies urging Americans to buy Liberty Bonds, and he had done all he could to raise morale among the troops, as well. Now, Hollywood tried to dissuade him from rallying Americans to a cause he was even more passionately committed to. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, however, had heard of Chaplin’s project, and he enthusiastically encouraged him to proceed with it (Scheide and Mehran 73). Chaplin financed *The Great Dictator* entirely himself, giving him total artistic freedom. The critic Stanley Kauffmann has said that Jewish artists and intellectuals of the time thought of Chaplin as a comic David fighting Goliath (*Tramp and the Dictator*).

Chaplin’s physical resemblance to Hitler had not gone unnoticed. There are

competing claims as to who grew the distinctive mustache first. In any case, this resemblance was the perfect setup for a film involving mistaken identity. In *The Great Dictator* Chaplin plays two roles: that of Adenoid Hynkel, dictator of Tomania, and that of an anonymous Jewish barber. The film is replete with puns such as these. “Adenoid” may refer to Hitler’s hysterical rantings, and “Tomania” evokes both ptomaine poisoning and mental illness. Chaplin immediately collapses the claim of “Aryan” racial superiority by presenting the all-powerful Tomanian dictator as identical to the poor, humble Jew. Before the action even begins, we read the sly, ironic statement: “Any resemblance between Hynkel the dictator and the Jewish barber is purely coincidental.”

When the action does begin, it is narrated by a classic newsreel voice. We find Chaplin on a World War I battlefield, where he reports to General Schmelloffal. He is having considerable trouble with a modern, state-of-the-art weapon. Chaplin was notoriously suspicious of machines—of their dehumanizing effects on society. In this opening scene, Chaplin spoofs both militarism and military machinery. Of course, in the Fascist and National Socialist systems that Chaplin was satirizing, “human mechanization or regimentation [was] all pervasive” (Avisar 135).

After the weapon misfires, Chaplin becomes lost in a literal fog of war. He encounters Schultz, an incapacitated German soldier, and he agrees to Schultz’s request that he fly his plane for him. An inexperienced pilot, Chaplin soon has the plane flying upside-down. A number of sight gags ensue as the two marvel over their ability to defy gravity. Before long the plane goes into a nosedive, and Schultz, stoically accepting his apparent fate, rhapsodizes over what he will miss: Springtime in Tomania, with Hilda in the garden tending the daffodils. Hilda apparently has

trouble cutting the daffodils; it is like taking a life. Chaplin is being supremely ironic here. The real-life Nazis had no qualms about taking innocent lives. Ilan Avisar recognizes Schultz's speech as a satire of German romanticism (136). Warriors, in particular, were romanticized in German culture.

The action moves forward twenty years to the ascent of the Nazis (though that name is never used). Hynkel, "the Phooey," is introduced, wearing not the swastika but the sign of the double cross on his shoulders. He is engaged in a typical Hitleresque rant, which Chaplin deftly delivers in gibberish suggestive of German. The only intelligible word is "Juden," which is spoken with exaggerated contempt. Although he is obviously making highly inflammatory statements—the microphones melt before him—they are being translated in the most benign terms by an anonymous accompanying voice. In this way Chaplin portrays a world in denial over the Nazi threat (Avisar 137).

Nearby are his henchmen Herring and Garbitsch. Hynkel comments on the need for the Tomanians to tighten their belts, but the seriously overweight Herring has trouble tightening his. Avisar notes that no matter how broadly Chaplin satirizes his subjects, he never lets his audience forget the real dangers those subjects pose. Thus, after Hynkel's speech, Chaplin presents a scene showing Hynkel's adoring followers that looks identical to a scene from *Triumph of the Will*. There is even a shot of small children presenting Hynkel with flowers (137). When Hynkel leaves the rally, the statuary along the street is shown offering the infamous Nazi salute.

The barber is next shown in the Jewish ghetto. Hynkel's S.S. is on the march, arriving in town singing an inane song in praise of the Master Race. The S.S. is mercilessly ridiculed throughout the film. The scenes in which its troops appear

resemble scenes from a Three Stooges comedy. The barber, who is suffering from amnesia induced by his World War I trauma, inadvertently offends the troops, who respond by preparing to hang him from a lamppost. Fate intervenes in the form of Schultz, who has become a high official in Hynkel's government. He spares the barber, musing, "Strange . . . and I always thought of you as an Aryan." "I'm a vegetarian," the barber offers helpfully.

Avisar comments, "At this point, the quality of the barber's ignorance is ambiguous. On the one hand, his amnesia guarantees a special moral stature of supreme innocence. But it also contains a certain amount of criticism. Amnesia, Chaplin seems to suggest, is the Jewish malaise which is responsible for the forgetfulness of [a] history of persecutions and hence the unpreparedness for coping with newly erupting dangers of anti-Semitism" (138).

There is, in fact, no evidence that Chaplin blames the victims for the tragedy that is befalling them. The first part of Avisar's comment, however, bears examining. Who has more of the "special moral stature of supreme innocence" than the classic Jewish schlemiel, discussed in Chapter 2 of this dissertation? Hannah Arendt—who was accused of implicating the Jews in their own destruction—wrote an article in 1944 entitled "The Jew as a Pariah," in which she mistakenly identified Chaplin as a Jew and linked him with Heinrich Heine and Franz Kafka as "purveyors of the pariah and the schlemiel." She praised him for expressing "the time-honored Jewish truth that, all things being equal, the human ingenuity of a David can sometimes outmatch the animal strength of a Goliath" (qtd. in Bathrick, "Cinematic" 163).

Another critic, Robert Leslie Liebman, points to the frequent coexistence of the schlemiel and the superhero in Yiddish and Jewish-American narrative. The

former typically is glorified at the expense of the latter. This dynamic, according to Liebman, “offers . . . insights into Jewish fears of inadequacy, inferiority, and powerlessness—fears which are not necessarily unjustified” (195). Liebman also notes that “schlemiel /superhero fantasizing . . . is of special appeal to Jews, for it incorporates both messianism and the fluidity of identity that abounds in Jewish life and literature” (200). The schlemiel and the superhero often turn out to be the same person. In superhero narratives, the schlemiel may turn into the superhero by donning a costume. The schlemiel also may be perceived as the superhero through mistaken identity. *The Great Dictator* portrays both kinds of transformation. It climaxes with what Liebman calls “a wishful-thinking identity change,” in which the barber can merely put on the dictator’s clothing in order to assume his authority. Chaplin, however, wrote the closing speech with a serious purpose in mind, and he knew that the barber impersonating the dictator did not have the credibility to serve that purpose. Thus, Chaplin segues from fictional mode to documentary mode, delivering the speech as neither Hynkel nor the barber, but as Charlie Chaplin (Liebman 195).

The barber and the dictator may look alike, but they are polar opposites in every other respect. Avisar sums up the difference succinctly when he observes that whereas the barber represents humanity, the dictator represents inhumanity. He sums up Chaplin’s little tramp character—of which the barber is a variation—perfectly, as well, noting that he “has always celebrated human endurance in the face of threats and pressures, along with the demonstration of shrewd and healthy survival instincts which never violate the basic moral codes but rather contribute to and justify our sense of justice” (139).

One of the most famous scenes in the film captures the dictator’s

megalomania, which contrasts so sharply with the barber's humility. Alone in his regal offices, the dictator lifts a giant globe from its stand; it turns out to be as weightless as a balloon. As Annette Insdorf has written, the balloon reminds us that the dictator is an inadequate imitation of a true leader—inflated rather than truly substantial (62). As an unseen orchestra plays Wagner's Prelude to Act I of *Lohengrin*, the barber partners with the globe balloon in a gracefully executed ballet. In the ballet, the dictator does with the globe as he wishes—pushing it about, kicking it, and, most famously, hitting it with his backside. But after he has had his way with the world for a brief time, he loses it, as it bursts at his touch.

This scene is followed by one in which the barber is shown shaving a customer. The accompanying music this time is Brahms's Hungarian Dance No. 5. The barber's work is perfectly synchronized with the music. Avisar quotes Gerald Mast, who observed that "the barber's human work contrasts with the dictator's inhuman dreams of glory" (Avisar 140). As Insdorf points out, the barber succeeds where the dictator could not: "unlike his lookalike, the little barber knows just how far to press, and his sharp instrument does not prick what he holds." She goes on to write that "the juxtaposition of these two scenes suggests that the barber's razor will be the agent of Hynkel's deflation—as, indeed, Chaplin's keen humor is to Hitler's image in this film" (62).

Avisar characterizes these two opposing ballet scenes as "an essential dialectic inherent in the nature of art" (140). He points to Wagner's "heavy, sophisticated, highbrow music, which has a special elitist and nationalistic appeal" that was "especially significant to the Nazis, who saw Wagner's art and dedication to racist mythology as the expressions of a proto-Nazi" (140). Avisar also claims that

Germans “found in Wagner a lot of . . . metaphysical pretensions and ambitious superprofundity, the opposite of Charlie’s art, whose humor never failed to warm the heart because of his simple yet forceful grasp of human sensitivity and basic humane ethics.” He comments, “the piece by Brahms fits into this vision of humble and benevolent humanism. It is originally a folk dance, vivacious, exciting, and fundamentally life-enhancing. The Hungarian dance is the true expression of the folk, rather than Wagner’s ponderous sounds with their pompous intention to express the ‘Volk’” (141-42). Avisar finally points to Wagner’s explicit anti-Semitism; he speculates that numerous Nazi leaders attempted to rationalize their murderous program by associating it with Wagner and his artistic achievements.

In another noteworthy scene, Schultz, who has fallen out with Hynkel and gone into hiding in the ghetto, devises a plan to assassinate the dictator. He, however, does not wish to put himself at risk by carrying out the plan; he plans for one of the ghetto Jews to assume that risk. Five men are seated at a table, and each is served a piece of cake. They are told that the one who finds a coin in his piece will be the assassin. Unbeknownst to them, Hannah, a beautiful young ghetto resident and the barber’s love interest, has put a coin in each piece. As each man finds his coin, he surreptitiously passes it on to the next man. In this way Chaplin demonstrated the world’s cowardice and lack of commitment in its dealings with Hitler. As Avisar notes, “European countries and the rest of the world avoided confronting the Nazi menace by passing responsibility to one another, hoping to be individually spared by Hitler” (141).

In the next scene we are introduced to the dictator of Bacteria, Benzino Napaloni—“Il Digaditchee”—whose name suggests an inflammatory nature and a

Napoleonic ego. He arrives in town on an erratically behaving train—a satiric reference to Mussolini’s promise to make the trains run on time. Napaloni is memorably played by Jack Oakie; when Oakie looks imperiously at the camera, lower lip thrust forward, his resemblance to Mussolini is startling. Yet Oakie plays Napaloni as more of a buffoon than a menace. He uses crude Italian dialect and barely makes an effort to replicate a true Italian accent. He mugs and struts about shamelessly. At a formal military review, he is shown munching on peanuts from a bag.

Chaplin writes Napaloni’s scenes with Hynkel as pure farce. The two are continuously jockeying for position, trying to out-salute each other and to assume the most favorable position in photographs. Garbitch, after advising Hynkel that he must at all times speak down to Napaloni, lowers the height of Napaloni’s chair before an impending meeting. “I must be a-growing,” Napaloni marvels, as he takes his seat. There is a hilarious scene in the salon of Hynkel’s private barber in which the two dictators keep swiveling their chairs upward until Hynkel’s hits the ceiling, bringing him crashing to the ground. The competition culminates in an outrageous food fight between Hynkel and Napaloni.

This humor is silly and crude; yet it still manages to make us laugh heartily by reducing what is grave and threatening to farce. *The Great Dictator* is the first work addressed in this dissertation to portray the perpetrators of the Holocaust comically. It might provoke some to question whether there are some subjects that are off limits to humor. Surely, there are; it would be impossible to justify, for example, a humorous treatment of the Holocaust’s victims. Yet everything written in this dissertation so far has pointed to the capacity of humor to counter agents of injustice and cruelty.

Chaplin, here, has tapped into what Thomas Hobbes, five centuries ago, recognized as our glee when we realize that we are superior to others. Chaplin's portrayals of Hitler and Mussolini make us feel distinctly superior to them, provoking our laughter and scorn. Similarly, they reflect Freud's understanding of humor; they constitute what Freud referred to as a tendentious joke, in which by making those with power over us small, inferior, or comical, we achieve a kind of victory over them. Numerous contemporary theorists have recognized humor as an instrument of resistance and rebellion—most notably Terrence Des Pres.

Those who might question whether humor is appropriate to the portrayal of the perpetrators of the Holocaust need only look back to the jokes and humorous stories that circulated among the prisoners of the ghettos and camps, many of which have been preserved in the Ringelblum archives. It is noteworthy that in Britain, where the Nazi threat was real and imminent, *The Great Dictator* was received ecstatically (*Tramp and the Dictator*). Chaplin's comic strategy in his film was deliberate and shrewd. Hitler and Mussolini were two of the most terrifying men in recent history. It is a huge relief to see them portrayed as harmless buffoons and to be able to laugh openly at them.

The conclusion of *The Great Dictator*—the speech noted above—is completely out of character with what preceded it. Chaplin's speech is devoid of humor; it is a direct, ardent appeal to the citizens of the world to think about what is happening around them, to embrace the values of decency and kindness, and to stop Hitler's murderous program while there is still time. For this Chaplin was often criticized. The speech was said to be inappropriate and cliché-ridden. In fact, the scene immediately following the speech—in which, accompanied by inspirational

music, Hannah is shown gazing heavenward while being urged to remain hopeful—might fairly be characterized as maudlin. But the speech, itself, is eloquent and powerful. At the time of the film's release, the extent of the cataclysm to come was unimaginable. In light of this, perhaps Chaplin's critics may be forgiven their cynicism. But one would hope that in retrospect, even in this ironic, or post-ironic age, we can recognize the speech for the insightful, bold, courageous statement that it was.

Avisar points out that there are some who might criticize the film not for its serious ending, but rather for the comedy that preceded the ending. Years after the Holocaust, in his autobiography, Chaplin, himself, stated, "Had I known of the actual horrors of the German concentration camps, I could not have made fun of the homicidal insanity of the Nazis" (qtd. in Avisar 148). Chaplin need not have apologized. His film does not trivialize the Nazi menace; instead, it focuses on Hynkel/Hitler. As Avisar notes, "Chaplin's comic strategy in dealing with the figure of Hitler is twofold: he parodies actual incidents and characteristics, exaggerating to the point of a complete grotesque picture, and he also draws from the traditional stock of comic gags to create a perfect buffoon" (146).

Avisar also emphasizes that Chaplin portrayed Hynkel as a satanic figure. This, he reasons, places *The Great Dictator* within the carnival tradition. In late-medieval carnival, he states, which occurred immediately before Lent, Satan—typically played by a person held in low esteem by the community—was allowed a temporary triumph. In Germany, Satan enjoyed a temporary triumph, as well. Avisar also points to the emphasis on food in the film, culminating in the above-mentioned food fight, as a carnivalesque element.

Insdorf notes that the film might be criticized for its lack of verisimilitude, pointing especially to Chaplin's implied suggestion throughout *The Great Dictator* that resistance was a realistic option for, and perhaps even the responsibility of, Germany's Jews and Hitler's numerous other victims. Chaplin does seem to have been overly optimistic in regard to the possibility of successful resistance. This point aside, criticism of the film's lack of realism misses the point—the point, that is, that Terrence Des Pres made when he wrote that while mimesis is proper to high seriousness, which basically respects what comes to pass, antimimesis is appropriate to comedy, which ridicules what comes to pass. Clearly, it was Chaplin's intent to ridicule.

The Great Dictator was the daring attempt of a caring, compassionate man to do what he could, in his own way, to save the world. Milos Forman has said, ““You can say that the Allies liberated Europe physically, but with *The Great Dictator*, Chaplin liberated us spiritually”” (qtd. in Verma, 15). Even if Chaplin was not able to save the world, he was able to build morale and to help give the world the strength to save itself.

The next attempt at Holocaust humor on film was made two years later, in 1942, by Ernst Lubitsch. The film was *To Be or Not to Be*, and though it is similar to *The Great Dictator* in subject, and to some extent in purpose, the two films are markedly different in style and tone. Both filmmakers wished to satirize Hitler, but Lubitsch casts an even wider net. Chaplin's message is direct and unambiguous; Lubitsch's message is more complex, and his style far more subtle. The critic Gerd Gemunden has stated that whereas Chaplin's film was successful with audiences

when it was released, “over time [its] reputation has withered” (80). This assessment is debatable. He also states that *The Great Dictator* draws “a clear line between vice and virtue and [was] therefore easier for critics to like” (79). It can be argued that the line between vice and virtue was never clearer than it was during the Nazi era and that Chaplin was not in error in highlighting Nazi vice.

Certainly, American audiences were more receptive to anti-Nazi films in 1942—after the invasion at Pearl Harbor—than they had been in 1940; the studios were less timid about producing them, as well. Lubitsch was one of several émigré or exiled film directors active in Hollywood at this time. He had left Germany in 1922; numerous other directors, producers, cinematographers, and actors were to follow. Hitler was especially antagonistic to Lubitsch, allegedly because of “the ways in which he had flaunted his Jewishness” in his early work (Gemunden 61). Lubitsch’s German citizenship was revoked in 1935. He was specifically targeted in the vicious 1940 propaganda film *The Eternal Jew*.

Ironically, while Lubitsch was regarded as not German enough in Germany, he was regarded as too German in the United States (Gemunden 60-61). He was asked to hide his German background, but he declined to do so. Still, his films tended to be set in what Gemunden calls “Lubitschland.” Lubitsch, Gemunden writes, “became an expert [at] revisiting a time and place which for Americans connoted ‘The Old World’ but which had little to do with his native Berlin” (62). Much of what Gemunden calls “exile cinema” featured representations of Europe that, while not realistic, “were in synch with the contemporary American imagination.” Gemunden refers to this as a strategy of “staged authenticity.” He concludes that one aim of *To Be or Not to Be* was to illuminate the ways in which Hollywood shapes, or reinforces, our conception of reality.

To Be or Not to Be, as Gemunden recognizes, hinges on “the problematic of the performance of reality and its many related notions—mimicry and masquerade, cultural camouflage, mistaken identity, impersonation, travesty, cross-dressing, and ethnic drag” (62). The film opens with an impersonation—and a joke. Hitler appears to be present on the streets of Warsaw. He is peering into the window of a delicatessen, as the narrator exclaims, “That’s impossible—he’s a vegetarian! And yet—he doesn’t always stick to his diet. Sometimes he swallows up whole countries. Does he want to eat up Poland, too?”

The action shifts to what appear to be Gestapo headquarters. Hitler enters, and he is greeted by a chorus of “Heil Hitler” salutes. “Heil myself,” he responds. At this point Dobosh, the director, interrupts, and we realize we are witnessing the rehearsal of a play. As Gemunden comments, “the first five minutes of the film thus efficiently establish the tension between illusion and reality that will be explored in an ever more dazzling and complex structure throughout the film” (64). Viewers will continuously face the challenge of distinguishing what is really happening from what is being staged.

Gemunden comments, “In a film titled after the most famous line from Shakespeare’s most famous play it is not surprising to see the playwright’s belief that the whole world is a stage put to the test. The film introduces us to a world where the stakes to perform one’s part ‘right’ have never been higher.” In this world, one’s success at playing one’s part determines whether one can expect to be or not to be (64-65).

Jack Benny plays Joseph Tura, the lead actor in the troupe. Still, he is always unmistakably in character as Jack Benny—posing, preening, barely managing to keep his vanity under control. As Tura he plays, at one time or another, no fewer than five characters: Hamlet, a Gestapo officer, Colonel Ehrhardt, Siletsky, and a Nazi officer.

The last three of these roles were assumed in the service of politics, not art; Tura's aim was to deceive the Nazis. Lubitsch shows how deception, through impersonation, can be an effective strategy of resistance (Gemunden 65).

Lubitsch understood other ways in which performance influences politics, as well, and he wished to illuminate them in his film. Within the Nazi regime, military parades, torchlight marches, and political rallies made power starkly visible and intimidating. Joseph Goebbels, through his Ministry of Propaganda and Enlightenment, glamorized Hitler and his program. The Nuremberg rallies were impressive, but they became awe-inspiring when filmed by Leni Riefenstahl under Goebbels's patronage. In the opera scene in *To Be or Not to Be*, Lubitsch parodies the famous image from *Triumph of the Will* showing Hitler from the back with his worshipful audience before him (Gemunden 66).

Gemunden offers a fascinating, terrifying example of performance influencing politics: the Gleiwitz incident of 1939, which the Nazis used to justify their invasion of Poland. On August 31 of that year, members of the S.S., impersonating Poles, staged an invasion of the small Silesian town of Gleiwitz. They captured the town's radio station and broadcast an inflammatory anti-German speech in Polish. To make their deception more convincing, they dressed a number of inmates from the nearby Sachsenhausen concentration camp in Polish uniforms, murdered them, and left them behind as "casualties." Gemunden speculates that Lubitsch had heard about this incident from Polish producer and journalist Richard Ordynski. Lubitsch had consulted with Ordynski prior to filming *To Be or Not to Be* in regard to theater life in Warsaw during the occupation. Gemunden comments that the film can be viewed as an ironic response to the incident (67-68).

Another critic, Hassan Melechy, reminds us that Hamlet uses a play to “catch the conscience of a king”—in other words, “to unmask repressive forces through their doubling or simulation on the stage” (21). In *To Be or Not to Be*, Lubitsch unmasks the Nazis through parodic simulation. Melechy further comments, “By presenting these officers and operatives as players in the great second-rate and bombastic performance of the twentieth century, Lubitsch raises the question of whether Nazism is already a self-parody” (21). Melechy refers to a speech Himmler addressed to his S.S. comrades at Treblinka and notes that in spite of its monstrosity—or perhaps because of it—it provokes laughter (21). The humor that provokes this laughter falls well within the realm of the grotesque, in which there is a delicate balance between comedy and horror. He states that Lubitsch, throughout *To Be or Not to Be*, skillfully captures the intersection of these two elements.

We might revisit the scene referred to above in which the actor Bronski responds to a fervent chorus of “Heil Hitler” salutes by deadpanning “Heil myself.” Here Lubitsch is unmasking, through parody, an egomaniacal dictator and the robotic responses he can effortlessly elicit from his followers. The humor here is dark, though not grotesque. The horror that the dictator has unleashed is not referred to.

On another level, Lubitsch is parodying an insecure actor who craves adoration and is not beneath granting himself a winning punchline in order to get it. Louis Kaplan recognizes a strain of Jewish humor—what he calls “Jewish self-irony”—here (351). The actor is fully aware that he lacks the charisma of a Hitler. The irony is compounded by the fact that the line is spoken by an actor playing a deadly enemy of the Jews.

It is noteworthy that neither Jewishness nor any other ethnicity is ever directly referred to in *To Be or Not to Be*. One character, however—an actor in the troupe—is

named Greenberg; because of his name, we infer that he is Jewish. He tells the next joke in the film. Addressing another actor, he states, “What you are I wouldn’t eat!” He is referring to “ham,” of course, and in so doing giving us another clue to his ethnicity. Those familiar with Jewish humor would recognize this as the punchline to a classic Jewish joke; at least one variation of it has been attributed to Israel Zangwill. It was often used to deflate anti-Semitic remarks. Kaplan states that there is, thus, a subtext to Greenberg’s joke and that it needs to be understood within the context of German anti-Semitism and Polish collaboration (351).

Lubitsch’s omission of the word “Jew” is most obvious on the three occasions when Greenberg recites Shylock’s iconic Rialto speech from *The Merchant of Venice*. The speech takes on a different meaning each time he recites it. Before examining Greenberg’s version of the speech, we might read the speech as Shakespeare wrote it:

I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew
hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions;
fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons,
subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means,
warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as
a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you
tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not
die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? (3.1)

In *To Be or Not to Be*, the opening words, “I am a Jew,” are omitted; “I” or “we” is substituted for “Jew”; and the comparison “as a Christian is” is excluded. Gemunden points out that these omissions actually may work to highlight a censoring of “the one who cannot be named” (73).

The first time Greenberg recites the edited speech, he is backstage with Bronski while the troupe is performing *Hamlet*. Both men are in costume, waiting for their cues. After reciting the speech, Greenberg laments that all he ever gets to do is carry a spear. The speech is devoid of political meaning at this point. Later, after the audience has seen posters indicating that Warsaw has fallen to the Nazis and that warn “Verboten” and “Death Penalty,” Greenberg recites selected lines from the speech. Shylock’s rage over discrimination and injustice are especially meaningful against this backdrop. When Greenberg finishes speaking, the camera pans back to reveal that he and Bronski are leaning on snow shovels—significant because shoveling snow was a form of forced labor for Polish Jews (Gemunden 72).

Greenberg’s final recitation of the Rialto speech occurs toward the end of the film. The members of the troupe, who have become involved in the Polish resistance, need to escape Warsaw. Tura’s cover has been blown. Dobosh, the producer, calls upon Greenberg to take a risk. The scene shifts to the foyer of the Polski Theater. Hitler is seated in the audience. As a diversionary tactic, Greenberg allows himself to be seized by the S.S. Meanwhile, Tura, in Nazi dress, and Bronski, dressed as Hitler, arrive, surrounded by other costumed members of the troupe. We hear the following dialogue:

Tura: How did you get here?

Greenberg: I was born here.

Tura: What made you decide to die here?

Greenberg (pointing to Bronski as Hitler): Him.

Tura: What do you want from the Fuhrer?

Greenberg: What does he want from *us*? What does he *want*

from Poland? Why . . . ? Why? Why? Aren’t we human?

Have we not eyes? Have we not hands, organs, senses,
 dimensions, affections, passions? Fed with the same food?
 Hurt with the same weapons? Subject to the same diseases?
 Healed by the same means? Cooled and warmed by the same
 winter and summer? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If
 you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die?
 If you wrong us, shall we not *revenge*? (qtd. in Rosenberg 230-31)

Greenberg then lunges at Bronski disguised as Hitler, but he is restrained by an S.S. guard. Tura calls on two of the actors dressed as lieutenants to take Greenberg to his headquarters. Greenberg, pretending to struggle, is led off. He has finally been allowed to perform the starring role he has craved, and more important, he has been allowed to articulate his, and presumably Lubitsch's, rage. It also might be said that he has successfully played a joke on his mortal enemies.

At least two of the more obvious jokes in *To Be or Not to Be* attracted attention and incited debate for violating contemporary standards of good taste. In one, Siletsky attempts to ingratiate himself with Tura, who is disguised as Colonel Ehrhardt, by informing him that in London, he is known as "Concentration Camp Ehrhardt." As Nicholas Jones comments, this constitutes "a blatant trivialization of Nazi brutality—genocide presented as small talk" (275). Tura replies, "Yes. . . . We do the concentrating, and the Poles do the camping." Lubitsch deflected criticism of such dialogue by noting that he did not portray the Nazis as typically evil because "they passed that stage long ago. Brutality, flogging and torturing have become their daily routine. They talk about it with the same ease as a salesman referring to the sale of a handbag. Their humor is built around concentration camps, around the sufferings of their victims" (qtd. in Jones 275).

The second example of this kind of humor became arguably the most famous line in the film. Seeking praise, Tura, disguised as Siletsky, repeatedly asks Ehrhardt, “You’ve heard of that great, *great* Polish actor, Joseph Tura?” Ehrhardt replies, “What he did to Shakespeare, we are doing now to Poland.” This exchange was attacked for what was perceived as its tastelessness and its insensitivity to the suffering of Poland. As one critic put it, “what the Nazis did to Poland, wartime critics did to Lubitsch” (qtd. in Gemunden 76). Once again, Lubitsch refused to back down, writing in an open letter to the *Philadelphia Enquirer*: “Never have I said in a picture anything derogative about Poland or the Poles. On the contrary, I have portrayed them as a gallant people who do not cry on other people’s shoulders in their misery, but even in the darkest day never lost courage and ingenuity or their sense of humor. It can be argued if the tragedy of Poland realistically portrayed as in *To Be or Not to Be* can be merged with satire. I believe it can be” (qtd. in Insdorf 67).

Stephen Tifft, examining reactions to *To Be or Not to Be*, notes that the film “induce[s] disturbingly mixed responses in the spectator” (4). Many of those who viewed it, he speculates, may have initially enjoyed it but subsequently felt guilty over that enjoyment. He writes, “During historical cataclysm one is normally swept up in a compellingly unified moral and political logic; any rhetorical force capable of disturbing such immersion alarmingly must itself be unusually coercive” (4). He goes on to argue that rhetorical coercion is central to humor, and cites Freud, who, as noted in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, wrote that jokes—especially tendentious jokes—enlist the listener against the object of the joke. The listener’s laughter makes him an accomplice to the teller. If the listener, at some level, understands this, he may react with hostility.

The film ends with a joke that was met with some criticism but not as much as the

two cited above; the joke is aimed pointedly at the Nazis and their blind obedience to Hitler and the Party. The troupe is on a German plane, fleeing Warsaw. Bronski, disguised as Hitler, orders two German soldiers to jump. They shout “Heil Hitler” and—without parachutes—proceed to jump.

Lubitsch, himself, considers the appropriateness of comedy for illuminating the most serious of subjects in the scene noted above, in which, during a rehearsal of *Gestapo*, Bronski exclaims, “Heil myself!” Bronski justifies his adlib by stating that it will get a laugh. “I don’t want a laugh,” Dobosh replies. “This is a serious play, a realistic drama.” As Melechy notes, “Lubitsch self-reflexively raises questions of whether comedy can convey seriousness and of the appropriateness of mixing the two; he deliberately cues the expectation that the two genres be kept separate in order to broadside it. . . . Within the film comedy ensues because the seriousness of authority, and thereby authority itself, cannot be maintained” (30).

Melechy refers to a scene in which Maria Tura, played by Carole Lombard, argues that the glamorous, fur-trimmed dress she has chosen to wear in a concentration camp torture scene will underscore the horror being presented. It is obvious that she is interested in underscoring her own beauty. This time it is Greenberg who intervenes, suggesting that the incongruity will get a “terrific laugh.” As Melechy explains, “this incongruity will get a laugh because it suddenly erupts to disturb the seriousness of the ostensibly true image. As the character who most intensely faces the prospect of his own existence and identity being wiped out by the imposition of the Nazi simulacrum as representative of reality—whose existence and identity are accorded no place in that representation—Greenberg sees incongruity as an effective subversion of the imposition, since it becomes comic in an extreme situation” (31).

Joel Rosenberg points out that Greenberg defends what the film defends:

laughter. Lubitsch recognized that laughter is a serious matter—a powerful means of resistance. There are elements of *To Be or Not to Be* that invite challenge. At times the twists and turns of the plot and the different roles assumed by the actors become distractions, obscuring rather than clarifying Lubitsch's point. The decision to omit any direct references to Jews or Jewishness is also open to question. It seems unlikely that Lubitsch wished to deflect attention away from himself as a Jew. Did he wish to make his film more universal? If so, he shrank from an opportunity to make a bold statement in defense of a particular people. It is probably fair to assume that his aim was to produce art, not propaganda. It is not necessarily art's responsibility to serve politics.

Nevertheless, in *To Be or Not to Be*, through parody, Lubitsch exposed the absurdity and hollow theatricality of Nazism; he suggested that ultimately, this absurdity would cause it to self-destruct. Meanwhile, he did what he could to help the process along.

The next film to be addressed here, *The Producers*, was released much later—in 1968. The horrific events of the Holocaust had been exposed, but they had not assumed the place in the public consciousness that they would a decade later. Just as its star, Zero Mostel, came out of the Yiddish theater tradition, its writer and director, Mel Brooks, came out of the Jewish humor tradition. Brooks's rage at the cruelty and injustice of the Holocaust was clearly intense. But rather than respond with lamentation, he responded with humor—parody and satire that stretched its audience's tolerance for breaches of taste to the breaking point and beyond. As Brooks, himself, has said, “‘If I get up on the soapbox and wax eloquently, it'll be blown away in the wind. But if I do “Springtime for Hitler,” it'll never be forgotten’” (qtd. in Lipman 240).

Freud might characterize *The Producers* as one long tendentious joke. Still, whereas tendentious jokes are disguised expressions of aggressive impulses, the aggression in *The Producers* is barely disguised. It is embedded in humor, though—which manages to be simultaneously dark, and silly in the extreme. The premise is a simple one. A washed-up Broadway producer—Max Bialystock, played by Zero Mostel—is struggling to stay in business. His hapless accountant—Leo Bloom, played by Gene Wilder—notes that a flop could conceivably make more money for its producer than a hit. The idea would be to raise excess money from the play’s backers and then to produce a play so awful that it would close after the first night. The backers would then not expect to be paid back. Bloom is just thinking out loud, but Bialystock seizes on the plan and puts it into action, bringing Bloom in with him. It has been suggested that through the relationship between Bialystock and Bloom, Brooks treats the classic Jewish theme of transmission. Bialystock becomes a mentor for Bloom, initiating him into a more sophisticated, though less commendable, way of life (Sampson102).

Bialystock is a trickster in the classic mold, while Bloom is the inept, luckless schlemiel. The two characters have been said to embody “flagrantly anti-Semitic stereotypes” (Gubar 29). Susan Gubar writes, “With his comb-over, hefty corporeality, flabby lips, and big cigar, Bialystock bribes and defrauds authors, directors, patrons, reviewers, and the IRS.” She refers to him as a “contemporary Shylock,” and she writes of him and Bloom: “the lecherous and mercenary thieves could be said to step straight out of anti-Semitic iconography” (29). Gubar’s descriptions of Bialystock’s body and actions are accurate, but it is important to note that he was not created to confirm anti-Semitic stereotypes. Brooks is no self-hating Jew. His humor, like the humor of so many Jewish comic writers before him, is relentlessly self-mocking. Yet there is something

triumphant about the character Bialystock. At least temporarily, he is able to get the better of everyone around him—the innocent and the not-so-innocent.

Bialystock may be placed within the carnival tradition. He is a person of huge, exaggerated appetites, bordering on the grotesque. He is a common man—clearly a representative of low culture who is happy to rebel against high culture. The laughter in *The Producers*, like carnival laughter, is rich in irreverence and parody. The Jews of the Holocaust had been victimized in the most brutal of ways. In creating Max Bialystock, Brooks is suggesting that the post-Holocaust Jew will not be so easy to victimize—that he may even do some of the victimizing, himself.

The two producers, after considerable research, come upon a script that appears headed for certain failure: *Springtime for Hitler: A Gay Romp with Adolph and Eva at Berchtesgaden*. They track down the playwright, Franz Liebkind—a deranged former Nazi and present pigeon enthusiast. The title of his script and his passion for birds are satiric references to the back-to-nature aspect of the Nazi program (Samson 104). Liebkind speaks with a heavy German accent and sports a helmet at all times. Brooks turns someone who should be a symbol of unmitigated evil into a clown. Oddly enough, next to Bialystock, he seems like an innocent; at least we can be certain that what he says is what he truly believes, even when he delivers the inevitable line, “I was only following orders.” Brooks mocks the blind worship of the Fuhrer by having Liebkind note that Hitler was a terrific dancer who dressed better, had more hair, and told funnier jokes than Churchill.

The next character we meet is the man destined to direct *Springtime for Hitler*—Roger De Bris. Brooks’s caricature of the gay male artist is patronizing and offensive; thankfully, it would not be possible to present such a character today without eliciting a

roar of outrage. De Bris ends up starring in the musical number that is the showstopper of both *The Producers* and its play-within-a-movie. In the number, he plays an effeminate Nazi song-and-dance man. Brooks is most likely parodying the Nazi myth of virility here; this may in some way explain his decision to employ a gay stereotype.

The number, also entitled *Springtime for Hitler*, is breathtaking in its audacity. Steve Lipman has noted that Brooks was obsessed with the spectacle of Nazism (240); he parodies it mercilessly here. The piece opens with actors in German folk costumes, singing:

Germany was having trouble, what a sad, sad story
 Needed a new leader to restore its former glory
 Where, Oh where was he? Where could that man be?
 We looked around and then we found
 The man for you and me.
 And now it's . . .

The set changes, emulating the space in which Hitler gave his Nuremberg speeches. Against this backdrop, boy and girl dancers dressed in abbreviated black patent leather Nazi uniforms perform. There are showgirls in Valkyrie horns and other outrageous headpieces; their costumes are decorated with beer steins, pretzels, and other examples of Nazi kitsch. De Bris leads the chorus in the following:

. . . Springtime for Hitler and Germany
 Deutschland is happy and gay.
 We're marching to a faster pace
 Look out here comes the master race.
 Springtime for Hitler and Germany

Winter for Poland and France

Springtime for Hitler and Germany

Come on, Germans, go into your dance.

They do, to music with lyrics such as:

Don't be stupid, be a smarty

Come and join the Nazi Party.

The routine continues:

Springtime for Hitler and Germany

Goosestep's the new step today.

Bombs falling from the skies again

Deutschland is on the rise again.

Springtime for Hitler and Germany

U-boats are sailing once more.

Springtime for Hitler and Germany

Means that soon we'll be going

We've got to be going

You know we'll be going to war!

For the grand finale, a camera placed above the stage floor captures the dancing Nazis in rotating-swastika formation as a portrait of Hitler unfurls. Gubar writes that this “links Nazi martial executions and the camera work of Leni Riefenstahl’s pro-Nazi films with outdated Hollywood choreography, as racial camp mocks the shoddy theatricality of fascism” (30).

Most obviously, this represents a massive breach of decorum. We observe decorum, or standards of taste, to ensure that a serious subject is not trivialized. Viewing

the most serious subject of Nazism being treated in a most irreverent way throws us off balance. Our initial responses might be disbelief and shock, followed by outrage. But once our minds process the idea that this is parody—gross, gleeful, and perfectly realized—and that the objects of the parody are the perpetrators, not their victims, our response changes to laughter; the scene is, after all, hilarious. Is it really in bad taste to ridicule a hateful, murderous program? Like viewers of *The Great Dictator*, we exhale with relief and laugh with gratitude for the opportunity to see a terrifying movement brought down to size and treated with contempt.

In *The Producers*, the audience at *Springtime for Hitler*'s opening follows the pattern of responses described above. They at first react to the musical number with shock and outrage. The idea that what they are witnessing is parody hits them with the appearance of Lorenzo St. DuBois (L.S.D.) in the role of the Fuhrer. L.S.D., both onstage and off, is a stereotypical drug-addled hippie. Through this character Brooks finds yet another target for satire: the sixties counterculture. The actress playing Eva Braun plucks petals from a flower, reciting, "Er liebt mir, er liebt mir nicht." L.S.D., as a preoccupied Hitler, responds, "I *lieb* you, baby. Now *lieb* me alone." This is the point at which the audience exhales and laughs and the producers' scheme is foiled.

The satire within *The Producers* is multilayered. Brooks satirizes the connection between art and money as well as the connection between money and fraudulence. He satirizes both questionable Jewish business ethics and the atmosphere that encourages or even requires them. He pokes fun at the liberal counterculture but reminds his audience that it is vastly preferable in its innocence to the fascist culture of the forties. He mocks the unpredictability, malleability, and not infrequent failure of public taste. He satirizes Hollywood musical conventions at the same time as he shows how they can be used to

trivialize and ridicule evil. Most important, he portrays the Nazis as both fools and menaces and their program as both a joke and a nightmare.

The Producers is an unlikely subject for scholarly consideration; in fact, it has received very little. Yet it illustrates all three of the traditional theories of humor discussed in Chapter One of this dissertation. As the Superiority Theory suggests, we laugh when we feel superior to someone else. We may find that we feel superior to everyone in this film, since everyone is ridiculed for one thing or another. *The Producers* is a textbook illustration of the Incongruity Theory; the film's humor arises from the gross incongruity between a historical tragedy and its comedic representation onstage. And the Relief Theory is illustrated by our laughter when we witness something anxiety-provoking reduced to something farcical.

It illustrates traditional characteristics of Jewish humor, as well. It abounds in self-mockery. It mocks, as well, militarism and the blind obedience that this may entail. Hilarious as the film may be, it is also informed by a passionate concern for social justice. Brooks, well aware of the persecution that the Jewish people have endured, has created a work full of vitality and rebellion—two characteristics found in the best humor of every ethnic tradition.

Lina Wertmuller's 1976 *Seven Beauties* traditionally has been categorized as a Holocaust comedy. Yet it is nothing like the films discussed above. There is none of Chaplin's righteous idealism, Lubitsch's sly subtlety, or Brooks's outrageous, rebellious hilarity. This is an ugly film—perhaps ideally suited to its ugly subject. Any humor in it is so dark that it is hard to find. It falls within the category of the grotesque, although it comes close to tipping the balance between comedy and horror and pointing us toward

horror and the abyss.

The humor in *Seven Beauties* has been categorized as carnivalesque, as well. In some respects it is, but in others, it diverges. Pasqualino surely comes from the world of low culture. Yet whereas Bakhtin's low-culture folk are rebellious, Pasqualino recognizes nothing against which he wishes to rebel. The title of a song played at intervals during the film translates roughly as "To Get By." It is sung resignedly at the beginning of the film, and somewhat hysterically at the end—after viewers have seen what getting by entailed. Pasqualino's goal is no more than to get by—to survive. Further, although Bakhtin spoke of carnival allowing hope to replace fear, there is nothing in *Seven Beauties* to suggest hope for a better future.

Wertmuller is rebellious in that she is relentlessly contemptuous of the society that allowed Pasqualino and men like him to flourish. The first institution within that society that she focuses on is fascist nationalism. The film opens with a frozen image of Hitler and Mussolini talking and laughing while shaking hands. They suggest a pair of buffoons, until they are eclipsed by shots of planes crashing, bombs falling, structures collapsing, and mutilated bodies piling up. What Wertmuller is decrying here is "the murderous irresponsibility of those who play at war" (Deleas 154). She sees fascist nationalism as an outgrowth of a patriarchic society that encouraged appropriation and domination. In Pasqualino, she created a character manipulated and controlled by patriarchy and, more specifically, the code of machismo (Deleas 154).

He is a character preoccupied with commanding respect. Yet brutality and cunning are the qualities that command respect in the society in which he lives. He comments at one point that he admires Mussolini for giving Italians respect; in this way, Wertmuller connects the personal to the political. In Pasqualino's world, living morally

and ethically counts for nothing. Audacity is mistaken for greatness, no matter what cause audacity serves. Pasqualino is committed to the idea of honor, yet he has no idea of what constitutes honorable behavior. He is quite willing to commit murder in the name of honor. This is a world in which expediency always trumps truth, feelings of guilt and remorse are unknown, and confession is for fools. It is a world of inverted values, just as the Holocaust world was.

The first moral dilemma Pasqualino faces occurs shortly after the opening described above, in which Hitler and Mussolini laugh against a background of carnage. We see Pasqualino and his friend Francesco hiding in the woods; we don't know how they got there. They witness a number of people being marched to the edge of a pit and shot by German soldiers. They are assumed to have been Jews. Francesco is anguished over his and Pasqualino's failure to interrupt the execution; he feels that their silence has rendered them accomplices. Pasqualino takes a pragmatic approach, stating that to intervene would have been suicidal and, furthermore, would have accomplished nothing. Francesco remains terribly distressed, stating, "After a while, you must say no!"

Bruno Bettelheim, himself a Holocaust survivor, wrote a piece entitled "Surviving" for *The New Yorker* in 1976. It was a response to both *Seven Beauties* and *The Survivor*, a book by Terrence Des Pres. The piece gained considerable notoriety and provoked an impassioned debate. His thesis is that both works "interpret survivorship falsely" in that they imply that physical survival alone—what he terms "a completely empty survivorship"—is a sufficient goal (31).

One might predict his reaction to Pasqualino's pragmatism, noted above. Yet as Primo Levi has stated, "survival without renunciation of any part of one's moral world—apart from powerful and direct interventions by fortune—was conceded only to very few

superior individuals, made of the stuff of martyrs and saints” (Preface, qtd. in Pfefferkorn 15). We are made uneasy by the thought of questioning any survivor. Still, it seems likely that Bettelheim sets a standard that while admirable and heroic, is unrealistic for most of us.

He compares *Seven Beauties* unfavorably to the play *The Deputy*, by Rolf Hochhuth. Audiences of the latter, Bettelheim claims, “left the theater with the conviction that the only moral position possible was that of the hero: to take a firm stand against evil, even if it means risking one’s life, although, out of anxiety, most people, including oneself, may not act in accordance with such a demanding moral obligation” (32). He states that *Seven Beauties*, by contrast, implies that “to oppose Fascism, while virtuous, would have been pointless, because it would have been completely ineffective” and that the film “justifies evil by implanting a smug conviction that nothing could have made any difference” (33).

Seven Beauties, like so many other works that seek to represent the Holocaust experience, does not proceed chronologically. The past and the present are presented out of order, disrupting our ability to follow events and make sense of them. This disorder and confusion reflect life under Nazi rule. Eventually, Pasqualino and Francesco are interned in a concentration camp. The set is highly stylized, yet at the same time it evokes the hellish atmosphere of such places with particular eloquence. Pasqualino quickly calculates that his best chance of survival lies in seducing the wholly repellent, sadistic female commandant of the camp.

The inclusion of sexual elements in Holocaust art can be problematic. They have been used in ways that exploit or cheapen the event. Yet Alvin H. Rosenfeld acknowledges “the erotic underside of totalitarian terror,” commenting that “there is no

denying that the promise of absolute lordship and absolute submission projected by the political program of the Third Reich speaks to sexual yearnings of a powerful and, it would seem, pervasive kind” (166).

Rosenfeld recognizes Wertmuller’s concern with the connections between sex and politics. Yet he objects to the manner in which she expresses her concern in *Seven Beauties*. These connections normally are regulated by social, religious, cultural, and legal constraints. Under Nazi rule, however, these constraints broke down. This was true in the camps, particularly, where the inmates had neither political freedom nor sexual protection. Those in power could use terror and the threat of death to sexually abuse the inmates at will. Rosenfeld objects to Wertmuller’s use of the camp experience as a metaphor for the pervasive political and sexual exploitation of men and women that she sees in the world in general (166-67).

There are, in fact, two scenes in the film that present sexual abuse quite literally—not metaphorically, at all. In the first Pasqualino, with feelings of entitlement absorbed from the fascist, patriarchal society in which he exists, rapes a patient in a mental hospital while she is tied to her bed. In the second, his scheme to reverse the balance of power between him and the commandant having failed, he is effectively raped by her; he must perform sexually if she is to allow him to remain alive.

It should come as no surprise that Bettelheim, a psychoanalyst, suggests that while Wertmuller may consciously reject fascism, machismo, and terror, “unconsciously she is fascinated by their power, brutality, amorality—their rape of man” (32). Bettelheim theorizes that Wertmuller consciously “wishes to believe in the goodness of man, symbolized in the anarchist Pedro, the unpolitical Francesco, and the Socialist whom we encounter on his way to spend twenty-eight years in prison for believing in the freedom

and dignity of man, but unconsciously she ridicules all three for their inefficiency.

Goodness is weak, and fails; only evil triumphs” (32).

Judgments about Wertmuller’s unconscious feelings can be no more than speculation. She may or may not be fascinated by man’s basest instincts and actions, but there is no evidence in *Seven Beauties* that she in any way excuses or endorses them. Bettelheim’s feeling that she ridicules goodness is entirely subjective. Goodness in the film fails because, as Rosenfeld noted, societal constraints broke down under Nazi rule; there was nothing to promote and protect goodness.

Bettelheim takes strong exception to what he perceives to be Wertmuller’s depiction of the prisoners as passive victims. He is also greatly disturbed by what he understands as her message that heroic resistance is pointless because it is doomed to fail without benefiting anybody. He emphasizes that in fact, the prisoners at all times had to be proactive in ensuring their own survival. He gets to the heart of his argument when he asserts that *Seven Beauties* offers “the completely erroneous implication that to survive in the camps one had to act as if one were vermin, as Pasqualino does . . . [whereas] in fact the exact opposite was true: while moral convictions and acting upon them did not guarantee survival—nothing did and most prisoners perished—these things were nevertheless important ingredients of survival” (32-33). Recalling his own experience in the camps, he states that despite pervasive starvation and exhaustion, the inmates tried as best they could to behave morally. This involved, for instance, sharing meager rations of food or helping weaker inmates with the hardest labor. He states, further, that those like Pasqualino, who tried to align themselves with their captors and thereby further endangered their fellow inmates, were less likely to survive (38).

In fact, meaningful active resistance was essentially impossible in the camps. The

captives' resources were vastly outmatched by those of their captors. The prisoners can hardly be blamed for their own helplessness, and there is nothing in *Seven Beauties* to suggest that Wertmuller does blame or disparage them. Sadly, it is a historical truth that, overwhelmingly, heroic resistance was fruitless. Wertmuller does not suggest, however, that it is stupid to resist. The deaths of Pedro and Francesco benefit no one, yet Wertmuller's portrayal of the two men is unmistakably sympathetic. They are decent, principled men brought to the breaking point by unendurable circumstances. It is those circumstances Wertmuller is condemning—not the two men.

Ultimately, *Seven Beauties* confronts the issue at the heart of so much Holocaust literature: What would you do to save yourself? The commandant forces Pasqualino into the kind of situation Primo Levi so memorably describes in "The Gray Zone," discussed in Chapter 3 of this dissertation. She makes him an accomplice to Nazi terror by ordering him to choose six men at random for execution. If he obeys her order, he and the rest of the men in his barrack will get an additional food ration; if he disobeys, he and the rest will be executed. This is a perfect example of what Lawrence Langer has called "the choiceless choice."

Pedro takes his fate into his own hands, jumping into the camp latrine, where he either drowns in excrement or dies from the bullets fired at him by the Nazi guards. Bettelheim criticizes Wertmuller for creating such an undignified death for Pedro. This is a meaningless criticism given the already sickening situation he has been trapped in up to the moment of his death. Francesco cries out in rebellion. The guards bring him to his knees and order Pasqualino to shoot him. He hesitates, but he finally fires into Francesco's downturned head. Bettelheim suggests that Pasqualino has achieved a victory by surviving. Actually, Wertmuller makes it clear that he has been shattered.

We might consider the question of whether Pedro's and Francesco's actions rendered them heroes. Eli Pfefferkorn makes the point that within the camps, the very concepts of life and death took on new meanings. In the death-promoting environment of the camps, he writes, "dying, whether through suicide or defiance, was no way of achieving martyrdom or heroism. For the sanctification of death by martyrdom or its glorification by heroism was tantamount to submission to the oppressor. In the death camps, death was never a triumph" (18-19). His point is not to demean Pedro and Francesco; it is to emphasize that there was no place for the heroic ideal in the camps.

When Pasqualino returns to Naples after Liberation, he finds that all the women in his life have survived through prostitution. In fact, prostitution has been a motif running through the film; many, most obviously Pasqualino, have prostituted themselves in order to stay alive. His mother urges him to forget what has transpired. "What's done is done," she comments. There is no point, in other words, in reflecting, understanding, or feeling remorse. Her words of advice are arguably among the most terrifying words spoken in the film.

As noted above, *Seven Beauties* is regarded as a comedy, though given its unrelieved grimness, it is hard to say why. Vincent Canby pronounced the astonishing judgment that the film is "uproariously funny" (1). Bettelheim sees dark, grotesque comedy in the film and worries that it neutralizes the horror being presented. He writes that "the film's irony, its farcical scenes, its contradictions prevent us from taking seriously the concentration-camp world it so gruesomely presents" (34). Noting the flashback technique used in *Seven Beauties*, he writes, as well, "We experience horror, then something grotesquely comic or funny, then scenes of brutality, then farcical humor again. With this technique, the horror becomes background for the comic scene, and the

comic scene wipes out not the fact of the horror but its emotional impact, with the result that the horror adds, by contrast, to the effectiveness of the comic experience” (48).

All this presupposes that there are scenes in *Seven Beauties* that are truly comic. One scene often cited as comic is the one in which Pasqualino, having bungled the assassination of a Mafia boss, decides to cut up the body, pack up the parts, and send them to three separate destinations in Italy. There is, to be sure, an element of black humor in this. We are free to laugh because the victim was a villain. When the jokes are on Pasqualino while he is a prisoner in the death camp, however, laughter becomes problematic. There is an enormous incongruity between the reality of camp life and Pasqualino’s belief that he might charm himself out of danger. Still, morally compromised though he may be, in the camp this villain is unquestionably a victim. Bettelheim needn’t have worried that the film neutralizes the horror of camp life; horror is overwhelmingly the feeling we are left with.

Annette Insdorf has stated that “Wertmuller’s use of laughter is tantamount to assault. The target? Our own complacency” (74). Viewing *Seven Beauties* is, indeed, like being assaulted. This assault can motivate either a desire to turn away or a desire to understand. For those who wish to understand, *Seven Beauties* can be a powerful instrument through which to view an ugly time.

“This is a simple story . . . but not an easy one to tell. Like a fable, there is sorrow . . . and, like a fable, it is full of wonder and happiness.” These words, both written on the screen and spoken by an anonymous narrator, introduce *Life Is Beautiful*, Roberto Benigni’s highly controversial 1997 film. The film raises many questions. Does calling it a fable justify its misrepresentation of history? Does it warrant comedic treatment of the

direst of situations? Can the film really be considered a fable when the narrator who introduced it, now revealed to be the grown-up Giosue, closes it with the words, “This is my story, this is the sacrifice my father made for me”? These words suggest to the audience that the film has been, after all, a survivor’s memoir (Lichtner 237). It also raises the question of whether a film that, perhaps, speaks more to the emotions than to the intellect is necessarily less worthy.

Imre Kertesz had himself been a child inmate of Auschwitz and Buchenwald; he drew on that experience to produce the novel *Fateless*. In *Fateless* the narrator expresses his disdain for clichés. The book contains not a trace of sentimentality. One might expect Kertesz to be disparaging of *Life Is Beautiful*, but in fact, he is sympathetic to Benigni and his film. In his essay “Who Owns Auschwitz?” he notes that the central concept of the film is tragic rather than comic. He comments that although the information packet accompanying his videocassette assured him that the producers had striven for authenticity, “fortunately, in this they did not succeed.” He elaborates, “Authenticity lies, admittedly, in details, but not necessarily in material details. . . . But the point here lies in something totally different: the spirit, the soul of *Life Is Beautiful* is authentic, and it moves us with the power of the oldest kind of magic, the magic of fairy tales” (271).

Kertesz calls attention to the central conceit the film—the concentration camp experience as a game. He asks, “Does not this device of the ‘game’ correspond in an essential way to the lived reality of Auschwitz? One could smell the stench of burning human flesh, but still did not want to believe that all of this could be true. One would rather find some notion that might tempt one to survive” (271). He then focuses on the scene in which Guido, who knows not a word of German, “translates” the instructions of

the German guards as instructions to his game, in order to spare Giosue from fear.

Kertesz comments, “What this scene contains cannot be described in rational language, and says everything there is to say about the absurdity of that atrocious world, and about those who stood in opposition to the madness, unbroken in their spiritual strength” (271).

Nazism was founded on fantasy, delusion, and lies—on the myths of racial purity and the superiority of the so-called “Aryans.” Benigni parodies this fantasy—most explicitly in the scene in which Guido goes to the school where Dora teaches and poses as an official from the Ministry of Education. There, before an astonished audience of teachers and students, he strips to his underwear and offers his own body—very much at odds with the Aryan ideal—as an example of physical perfection. Ruth Ben-Ghiat notes that an important theme of *Life is Beautiful* is the ability of fantasy to do both good and evil. On the one hand the film shows the (admittedly downplayed) consequences of Nazi utopian thinking. On the other, it shows how Guido “repeatedly transforms ugly situations into opportunities for joyful conspiracy,” as in the above-noted schoolroom scene (Ben-Ghiat 254). In the camp, as Ben-Ghiat writes, “he interprets rules, rituals, and symbols . . . countering the Nazi will to power with a demonstration of the power of the will to make sense of the senseless and to interrupt the process of dehumanization” (254).

One of the most anxiety-provoking aspects of life during wartime, for civilians and soldiers alike, is the feeling of loss of control. For camp inmates, the loss of control was absolute. Well before his internment, Guido had enjoyed testing the strength of his will. His friend Ferruccio had introduced him to his version of Schopenhauer’s philosophy: “With willpower, you can do anything.” In order to protect Giosue, and himself, as well, Guido had to find a way to make sense of the senseless environment in which he was trapped and to will some kind of structure or order upon it. It has been

recognized that children have a particular gift for coping with war—among them, “the child’s capacious and flexible imagination; the child’s intense powers of observation; the child’s ability to focus on his or her needs or wants (to the exclusion of all else); the child’s fusion of the desire to please with a self-assertive rebelliousness; the child’s playful methods of experimentation and reality-testing; and, most important, the child’s drive to find ways to control or master experience” (Kroll 32). Benigni imbued Guido with these childlike gifts, which allowed him to navigate the world of the camps with some degree of success. Guido rebels against reality and creates, for himself and Giosue, a world within a world—one in which hope and love are possible.

The use of the imagination to control traumatic experience is not an idea put forth capriciously by Benigni; it is a phenomenon that has been observed by numerous psychoanalysts over the years, including Freud. When Freud was seeking to explain the nightmares experienced by World War I veterans, in preparation for his book *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, he observed children at play. Specifically, he studied them playing “*Fort-da*”—a game of disappearance and return. As described by Pamela L. Kroll, “the child first throws away his toys to make them disappear (so they are ‘gone’) and then reels them back so that they can reappear (and are ‘there’), a game repeated untiringly by the child as it offers not only comfort and control, but *pleasure*” (39). The pleasure comes from the child’s acquired sense of mastery.

Kroll points out that Guido plays games of disappearance and return throughout the film. There are appearances and disappearances, substitutions and exchanges. He plays a game that involves exchanging hats, in which one hat suddenly disappears only to be replaced by another. He loves to surprise his family and friends by suddenly appearing, seemingly out of nowhere. While waiting tables at a restaurant, he takes one

customer's lunch away and gives it to another, late-arriving customer known to give generous tips. As noted above, he takes the place of an official scheduled to visit Dora's school and runs away when the real official arrives. Also as noted above, he presents himself as a German translator. As Kroll notes, "He learns to manipulate circumstances and situations to get what he wants" (38). Giosue has a penchant for the same type of play.

Certainly, Freud's subjects played their games under conditions vastly different from those faced by Guido and Giosue. Still, as Kroll writes, "In both cases the child [or the childlike Guido] compensates for his trauma by re-staging the trauma as a game; in both cases, the game changes the child's role from a passive to an active one; in both cases, something unpleasurable is transcended by the invention of a game of control that is largely experienced as pleasurable; in both cases, some degree of comfort and mastery is achieved by a child in a world fundamentally outside his control" (39-40). Thus, rather than merely imposing the idea of a game onto the Holocaust experience in order to create an entertaining film, Benigni has tapped into a primal need common to people in the throes of trauma.

Whether his strategy would have worked in the real, historical camps is another issue. Thinking of the camp experience as a game might have provided some measure of temporary comfort for the inmates, but it would not have saved any lives. Actually implementing the games that Guido played would have been impossible. Annette Insdorf (290), among others, has written of children who actually did survive the camps by chance, through cleverness, or with the help of heroic adults. Yet there is no point in citing these rare exceptions here; the devastating truth is that as a rule, young children were immediately put to death. So, was Benigni justified in presenting a situation in

which fantasy provided not only comfort, but salvation?

If we view the story as a fable or fairy tale, then Benigni is no more guilty of revising history than are Leslie Epstein, Philip Roth, Quentin Tarantino, Michael Chabon, Charlie Chaplin, Ernst Lubitsch, and the numerous other artists who have merged fantasy with reality in portraying the Holocaust. This dissertation has noted repeatedly the futility of attempting to replicate any event exactly as it occurred. Memory can be unreliable; testimony can be flawed. The enormity of this particular event renders it even more difficult to adequately represent.

A good deal has been written about flawed Holocaust testimony in Italy. Italy's participation and defeat in World War II have remained sensitive subjects. Among Italian films dealing with that period, comedies in which fascist aggression is downplayed have enjoyed the most success. Benigni has stated that *Life Is Beautiful* was inspired by his father, Luigi, who spent two years in a German concentration camp. In interviews, he describes Luigi as “an unfortunate innocent who comprehended little of the reality around him at the time of his deportation” (Ben-Ghiat 255). Yet as Ruth Ben-Ghiat has written, “One crucial fact complicates this scenario. Luigi Benigni was not an Italian Jew but a young member of the Italian fascist army” (255).

After the Italian surrender to the Allies in 1943, Luigi was deported to Germany along with some 1.2 million other Italian soldiers. In the German camps they were treated brutally by their former allies. This experience contributed to the culture of victimization and silence that prevailed after the war—a culture in which Italy's roles as fascist aggressor and perpetrator of anti-Semitic persecution were denied. As Ben-Ghiat writes, “*Life Is Beautiful* lays bare the limits of what can be told in Italy” (256).

Faced with a public unwilling to hear their stories, Italian veterans turned to their

families. Yet like most testimonies of traumatic experience, these stories were frequently incomplete or inaccurate. Luigi Benigni's testimony was characterized by "masking strategies such as the use of humor, understatement, or irony" (Ben-Ghiat 259). Ben-Ghiat concludes, "the director's reconstruction of history is founded on dissemblance. It reproduces, through the ruse and fiction of the game, the element of protective denial that marked his father's communications to his family" (259). She suggests that in transforming his father from a fascist soldier to a Jewish victim, Benigni—perhaps unconsciously or inadvertently—has misrepresented history and perpetuated the myth of Italian victimhood. Benigni, of course, has repeatedly insisted that it was not his aim to reconstruct or represent history. *Life Is Beautiful* may be, after all, neither history nor fairy tale but rather, an example of highly mediated second-hand testimony.

We return now to the problem of Giosue's closing words, which suggest that he has been narrating a memoir. If we take Giosue to be a substitute for Benigni, we now understand why his testimony seems so incomplete and dubious. Regardless of whether Giosue is the adult Benigni, he is still an adult attempting to recall and make sense of a highly traumatic childhood experience. Memory—especially traumatic memory—is acknowledged to be unreliable. If Giosue's reconstruction of history is skewed, it may be because he is faced with the challenge of imposing meaning on what was an arbitrary and senseless act—the death of his father (Glennan 93).

We return one last time to the question of whether a comedic treatment of trauma can be justified. The humor in *Life Is Beautiful*, gentle and silly as it may be, is also the humor of resistance and rebellion. Benigni ridicules Italian fascism from the outset, when Guido and his friend arrive in town, arms waving frantically, in a car with failed brakes. A crowd gathers at the side of the road, returning what they believe is the men's fascist

salute. Benigni here implies that Italians will salute anything that arrives with enough of a flourish. The lavish Ethiopian-themed party at which the fascist official Rodolfo announces his engagement to the unwilling Dora satirizes both the pretensions of the Italian ruling class and its dream of an African empire—built on fantasies of exoticism and romance (Marcus 157). As Millicent Marcus notes, “In critiquing the style of fascism, Benigni is critiquing fascism *as* style, as spectacle” (158). Two boorish children squabble and threaten each other until they are admonished, “Benito! Adolfo!” And as noted above, in a scene of pure farce, Benigni ridicules fascist racial discourse while impersonating a school inspector.

The humor in *Life Is Beautiful* is not dark; Benigni largely acts as a clown, and slapstick is featured throughout. It is worth noting, though, that especially in the second half of the film, Benigni’s clownishness has a hysterical edge. He is a clown, but not a fool; he fully comprehends the perils he and his child face. He is also a trickster, using his considerable wiles to preserve their lives and protect Giosue’s innocence.

Numerous viewers have cherished this tale of boundless parental love. Yet Maurizio Viano has noted an interesting phenomenon: “An examination of the critical judgments on *Life Is Beautiful*, conventionally framed within a low-, middle-, and highbrow hierarchy, reveals that, within the limits inherent in all generalizations, the higher the re/viewer’s position, the more negative the re/view” (28). Viano refers to French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s definition of taste: “the incorporated form of one’s class position and the conditionings imposed by it” (Viano 28). “Taking *Life Is Beautiful* seriously,” Viano proposes, “goes against high cultural taste” (28). He concludes, “Academic film scholars and highbrow critics . . . tend . . . to valorize those films whose consumption indicates that we do not fall for the temptations of the entertainment industry

(sentimentalism, media-hype, easy-to-understand plots, immediate pleasures)” (29).

Admittedly, *Life Is Beautiful* is characterized by all these temptations. It also “suffers” from an abundance of slapstick comedy and “feel-good, Capraesque humanism” (Viano 20).

Viano expresses his puzzlement over the idea of sophisticated critics, “normally suspicious of the realistic expectations typical of mass audiences” (30), criticizing *Life Is Beautiful* for its lack of verisimilitude when it so clearly was meant to be viewed as a fable, or fairy tale. He suggests that these critics would have been more receptive to a film made by someone they respected as a purveyor of high culture.

The division of culture into “high” and “low” is controversial in and of itself. Every critic, including Viano, has his or her biases. What appears to be irrefutable is that Benigni’s *Life Is Beautiful* fulfills a need in a great many people. Perhaps it is a need to be reassured that even in unspeakably horrific situations, we have the capacities to act with compassion and courage and to maintain hope. This is a basic human need not to be belittled by anyone.

It is critical to keep reimagining the Holocaust—to strive to comprehend what seems incomprehensible and to keep the memory of the event in the public consciousness. New and different means of expression should be embraced rather than shunned. The five filmmakers discussed in this chapter all challenged the prevailing tastes of their times and moved us forward in our ability to confront and contemplate a subject that will require reflection for a long time to come. At the same time, their work reflects theories of humor that have remained valid and relevant over decades and even centuries.

In antiquity, Plato and Aristotle recognized that laughter could be a form of

derision. Thomas Hobbes, in the sixteenth century, built upon the two earlier philosophers by formulating the Superiority Theory of humor, which stated that we laugh at people we feel superior to. Surely Charlie Chaplin understood this when he portrayed Hitler and Mussolini as people we could hardly feel anything *but* superior to. Ernst Lubitsch, as well, tapped into this theory when he made Hitler and all his henchmen look utterly ridiculous. Roberto Benigni did the same with Mussolini and the small-time bureaucrats who supported him. Mel Brooks makes use of the Superiority Theory in a somewhat more complex way. We may feel morally superior to his protagonists, but we still laugh when they outwit people they—justifiably or not—feel superior to.

The Incongruity Theory of humor, tentatively stated by Aristotle and later refined by Kant and Schopenhauer, held that we laugh at things that are unexpected, illogical, or inappropriate. By this definition, all Holocaust humor is illustrative of the Incongruity Theory; what could be more incongruous than pairing atrocity with laughter? Certainly all five filmmakers that have been discussed here have made this pairing, but none more audaciously than Mel Brooks with “Springtime for Hitler”; the very title more or less defines incongruity. The Relief Theory of humor, which states that laughter arises from the release of pent-up psychic energy, is evident in the films by Chaplin, Lubitsch, Brooks, and Benigni, as well. Through their depiction of dangerous men as buffoons, these films allow us, at least momentarily, some relief from the terror these men normally inspire; they allow us to substitute laughter for apprehension and fear. Similarly, they illustrate Freud’s concept of the tendentious joke, which holds that by ridiculing our enemies, we can, in some way, conquer them.

Theories about the social and political functions of humor are relevant to these films, too. Bakhtin’s rebellious common man with outsized appetites is represented by

Brooks's Bialystock, for example. All five filmmakers under discussion have been unafraid to use humor to resist and rebel against cruelty and injustice. They have recognized the power of humor to disrupt corrupt societies and advocate for positive social change. Benigni, most notably, has shown an awareness of the power of humor as a shield and agent of solace.

While none of these films fits precisely into the black humor tradition, Wertmuller's comes close. The absurdity in *Seven Beauties* is more political and individual than cosmic and universal. Still, there is the humorous treatment of what is grotesque that is the hallmark of black humor; there is also the absence of hope. There are the rapidly shifting narratives and indistinct boundaries between fantasy and reality that characterize works of black humor. Finally, there is Pasqualino—the classic inept, deprived, anti-heroic black humor protagonist.

There are even elements of Jewish humor in these films, although the filmmakers represent a variety of ethnicities. In *The Producers* we find Jewish self-mockery—though not self-hatred. We also find the classic Jewish-humor themes of preoccupation with money and questionable business ethics. In *The Great Dictator*, as in many Jewish jokes and stories, there are the aversion to violence and skepticism in regard to the heroic ideal. The anonymous barber in this film is very much the inept, unlucky schlemiel. Yet as in classic schlemiel stories, his weakness is a kind of strength. In *Life Is Beautiful* there is the stubborn optimism characteristic of the stories of Sholem Aleichem—stories that were repeated over and over in the ghettos and camps.

These films, and so many other examples of Holocaust literature, through their rejection of injustice and cruelty and their insistence upon compassion and decency, offer us hope and optimism in a world that continues to challenge our capacity for both.

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