

The Oedipus Complex and Écriture Féminine as Seen in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*

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Unconfined by a frame, on the last page of *Maus*, an illustration of the Spiegelman family tombstone and the author's signature is printed. While, like the student mentioned in *Teaching Maus to a Holocaust Class*, we may read this illustration as "Vladek's happy ending" (Barr 82), Emily Budick, in *Forced Confessions: The Case of Art Spiegelman's Maus* proposes we read it in terms of psychoanalysis. For Budick, this illustration reads, "what has been repressed and denied beneath consciousness is now consciously acknowledged" (394). Indeed, *Maus* is not necessarily about Vladek's trials and tribulations rather, it is about his son accepting the past. Thus, despite being plagued by Oedipal feelings associated with his mother's death, Art eventually surmounts them by identifying with his father. However, his identification comes about because his father destroyed his mother's diaries, silencing her écriture féminine and allowing his phallogocentric discourse to triumph.

Before proceeding to the argument, an understanding of the Oedipus complex is needed. In *The Ego and the Id*, Freud claims that "[a]t a very early age the little boy develops an object-cathexis for his mother, which is related to the mother's breast and is the prototype for an object-choice" (21). The complex reaches its "peak period" when the boy is between three and five years old, or in the phallic stage. During this period, the complex begins to decline and enter the latency period (Laplanche and Pontalis 254). The complex is only seen again at puberty when the boy's sexual wishes towards his mother become so intense, he perceives his father as an obstacle to his fulfillment of them. Now, due to an inherent bisexuality in children, the complex can manifest itself as "an ambivalent attitude towards his father and an affectionate object-choice towards his mother," and "an affectionate attitude to his father and a corresponding jealousy and hostility towards his mother." The object-choice is given up and complex is repressed upon a father – and mother – identification. The whole phase culminates with "the forming of a precipitate in *The Ego*, consisting of these two identifications" which then "confronts the other contents of *The Ego* as an ego-ideal or super-ego" (*The Ego* 22-24).

In *Maus*, because of the trauma inflicted by Anja's death, Art is plagued by remnants of his once-repressed Oedipus complex. As repression does not mean eradication, Oedipal feelings that seem to have been overcome can resurface upon the death of a parent or a similar traumatic experience (de Berg 80). Freud defined preconditions, which allow the

repressed to return: "the weakening of the anticathexis, the reinforcement of the instinctual pressure, and the occurrence in the present, of events which call forth the repressed material" (Laplanche and Pontalis 356). As such, it may be assumed that the first two preconditions occurred in Art's psychical apparatus, for Anja's death, which occurred in the present, managed to call forth repressed material; specifically, that of Art having her as an object-choice. This claim is supported by the fact that Art becomes excited when Vladek tells him about Anja's diaries and that Art continually asks about them throughout most of *Maus*. Art would not behave as such if he were not in need of his mother. However, he does not only desire his mother, but wants to identify with her as well.

Before Freud contemplated an inherent bisexuality in children, he believed the boy's object-cathexis could be fulfilled by, "either an identification with his mother or an intensification of his identification with his father" (*The Ego* 22). In other words, he believed the boy did not need both a father- and mother-identification. While Freud considered the latter to be more normal, for it allowed the boy to retain his affectionate relation to his mother (*The Ego* 22), Art, at least at the start of *Maus*, is trying to identify with his mother through his desire of her diaries. He is trying to do so because intensifying his identification with Vladek will not allow him to retain his affectionate relation to Anja. Since she is no longer physically present, identifying with his father will be fruitless. Moreover, Vladek is not one to reminisce about her, as is clear in Appendix A. So that even if Art intensified his identification with his father, he would not have a channel through which he could retain his affectionate relation to Anja. If Vladek did reminisce about his mother, Art would be able to live vicariously through him, and subsequently retain his affectionate relation. Thus, Art both desires and wants to identify with his mother.

However, because Art should not be experiencing these Oedipal feelings, they plague him. Being "over 30 years old" (Spiegelman 71), he is past the age when he should desire and want to identify with his mother. Furthermore, his display of reaction formation in his relationship with Françoise should not occur concurrently with an object-choice of his mother. Indeed, reaction formation is important here, as it is a defense mechanism displayed by men who have overcome their Oedipus complexes. Freud touches upon it in *On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love* when he states that "the strange failure shown in psychical impotence makes its appearance whenever an object which has been chosen with the aim of avoiding incest recalls the prohibited object through some feature, often an inconspicuous one" (150). In other words, men who have learned about the immorality of incest and as such have surmounted their Oedipus complexes do not desire objects, which remind them of their mothers, sisters, etc. That Art is with an object who

is the opposite of the women he describes in Appendix B, who “remind [him] too much of [his] relatives to be erotic” (Spiegelman 172), implies he understands the immorality of incest. Yet, that he displays his desire of his mother at the same time, like he does in Appendix C, in his need of her diaries, shows he has been afflicted with feelings he cannot control and which he probably would not choose to feel.

Of course, it is because Art perceives the diaries as the embodiment of Anja, that he is able to direct his object-cathexis of his mother towards them. Although they are not the only possessions Anja left behind, as Vladek makes clear when he says he destroyed the diaries “and other nice things of mother” (160), the diaries are the only things, which tell her “whole story from the start” (Spiegelman 86), undoubtedly in her voice. As such, they would have provided Anja with a presence in the world of the living had Vladek not destroyed them. However, before Art learns of their destruction, the diaries appeal to his object-cathexis of his mother for this very reason. Art’s attitude towards Vladek is like that of an adolescent boy in the midst of his Oedipus complex, ambivalent, as seen in Appendix D, shows he must perceive his father as an obstacle. Which, because of the “psychologically slanted” (Budick 391) nature of *Maus*, Vladek is literally portrayed as being. As is seen in Appendix E, whenever Art asks about the diaries, his father always avoids producing the diaries and as such, is an obstacle to Art being and identifying with his mother. Furthermore, that he calls his father a murderer twice after he learns the diaries have been destroyed (Spiegelman 161), testifies to the fact he perceives the diaries as the embodiment of Anja. Indeed, his calling Vladek a murderer for destroying inanimate objects does not make sense, unless the diaries are perceived as a body.

In effect, the destruction of the diaries is representative of the castration complex. A complex, which occurs during the Oedipus, the castration develops when the boy discovers the anatomical distinction between the sexes, and attributes the difference “to the fact of the girl's penis having been cut off” (Laplanche and Pontalis 59-60). Thus, he begins to fear being castrated himself, specifically, “the carrying out of a paternal threat made in reply to his sexual activities” (Laplanche and Pontalis 59-60). In other words, he begins to fear being castrated by his father, who he perceives as a “castrating agent,” for having sexual wishes in regard to his mother (Laplanche and Pontalis 59-60). This logic comes about as, “the influence of authority, religious teaching, schooling and reading” from which the boy learns that having such sexual wishes is wrong (*The Ego* 24). As such, the castration complex “marks the terminal crisis of the Oedipus complex in that it has the effect of placing a prohibition upon the child's maternal object” (Laplanche and Pontalis 60). The castration does so because the boy comes to understand that he cannot have sexual wishes in regard to his mother and as

such, cannot pursue his Oedipal feelings. Thus, after the castration complex, the father- and mother-identification occurs, and the superego is formed (*The Ego* 24).

Indeed, the scenes in which Art learns about the destruction of the diaries is representative of the castration complex, for in them Vladek becomes the influence of authority, and Art becomes the boy who has a prohibition placed on his maternal object. By telling Art the diaries do not exist, as he does in Appendix F, Vladek becomes the authority figure from whom Art learns he cannot desire his mother. Moreover, that Vladek cannot remember what Anja wrote, despite having “looked in” the diaries and knowing Anja meant for Art to inherit her story (Spiegelman 161), further shows he is an authority figure. Through his silence, Vladek reveals his refusal to act as a bridge between Art and Anja, as well as his need for Art to stop desiring Anja. Thus, Art becomes the boy who has a prohibition placed on his maternal object, for he comes to understand, from the influence of authority, that he cannot desire his mother.

What further support the fact that the castration complex is represented by the scenes in which Art learns about the destruction of the diaries is his subsequent identification with Vladek. Indeed, in the castration complex, “[t]he father is experienced as the source of all authority... and thus capable of castrating the boy-child” (*The Ego* 14). However, the boy manages to overcome this fear of his father and abandon his love of his mother by identifying with his father, with the understanding that by doing so, he will be able to occupy such a position of power in time (Wright 14). Art identifies with Vladek through the interview process, and subsequently abandons his need of Anja, specifically through the use of postmemory. The frame in Appendix G testifies to his use of postmemory, or his adopting of Vladek’s experiences as his own, for in the frame “flies that infest the corpses of the Auschwitz camp buzz around Artie and the smoke of his omnipresent cigarette blends with that from the crematoriums’ chimneys” (Dragulescu 142). True, Art mentions his mother in the frame and continues to ask about her until the end of *Maus*. However, only after he learns about the destruction of the diaries do “[t]he bodies of four Jewish girls, whom Vladek recalls were ‘good friends of Anja’s’ hanged in the Nazi-occupied Poland, materialize dangling from trees in the Catskills as Artie drives his wife and his father to the supermarket in the late 70s” (Dragulescu 142). In other words, only after Art learns about the destruction of the diaries are indicators of postmemory seen, signaling his identification with his father.

Furthermore, that Art portrays Anja as being led back to his father, and Vladek as calling her ‘my Anja’ in Appendix H, shows Art has abandoned his need of her and surmounted his Oedipal feelings. While the Oedipus complex is culminated with the forming of the superego in *The Ego*, in order to repress the complex (*The Ego* 24), Art cannot be said to have formed a superego. As he experienced the Oedipus complex in

childhood and adolescence, he has already formed one and repressed the complex. Instead, Art can be said to have surmounted his Oedipal feelings by way of his ego, which is “attributed the function of instigating repression” (*The Ego* 25). In other words, Art repressed his Oedipal feelings not through his superego, for he did not need to master the complex, but through his ego, because he needed to master feelings associated with it. Now, in Appendix H, which is seen at the end of *Maus*, Art portrays Anja as being led back to his father and his father as calling her ‘my Anja.’ His decision to portray his parents as such suggests Anja had been lost, or kept from his father by his need of her, but that Art has come to understand his mother belongs to his father. In other words, through the frames, Art shows he has abandoned his need of Anja and repressed his Oedipal feelings.

However, Art is only able to identify with Vladek and surmount his Oedipal feelings because his father destroyed Anja’s diaries, silencing her *écriture féminine* and allowing his phallogocentric discourse to triumph. Hélène Cixous claims writing for women is “[a]n act that will [sic] be marked by women’s *seizing* the occasion to *speak*, hence her shattering entry into history, which has always been based *on her suppression* (420 author’s emphasis). Although Anja seized the occasion to speak by writing diaries, she failed to have a shattering entry into the Spiegelman’s Holocaust history. Instead, her entry into Spiegelman’s Holocaust history is based on her suppression; that is, she only appears in *Maus* through Vladek’s discourse because her own voice has been silenced. Indeed, by destroying her diaries and subsequently silencing her *écriture féminine*, Vladek allowed his phallogocentric discourse to triumph, as his is the only discourse Art hears. His discourse is no doubt phallogocentric, as discourse is marked, or different for males and females, and “run by a libidinal and cultural — hence political, typically masculine — economy” (Cixous 418). As such, Vladek, being male and having learned to privilege the masculine, does the very thing Cixous condemned men of doing: he turns Anja into “the uncanny stranger on display” (419). In other words, through his phallogocentric discourse, he portrays Anja in ways which she herself would not, ways which privilege the masculine. Moreover, by allowing only his discourse to be heard, Vladek denies Art the chance to achieve a full father- and mother-identification, as Freud believed should occur. For, even when Art is told stories about Anja through which he can identify with her, such as the one about her friends who hanged near Vladek’s workshop (Spiegelman 239), the stories are from his father’s perspective.

In the end, most of what comprises this interpretation, and more, is reflected in the *mise en abyme* that is *Prisoner on the Hell Planet*. This is because, as a *mise en abyme*, the narrative clarifies the story in which it is set (Moshe 419). The trauma inflicted by Anja’s death, for instance, is seen in *Prisoner on the Hell Planet* when Art says to her, “You put me...shortened

all my circuits...cut my nerve endings...and crossed my wires!” (Spiegelman 105) Yet, the narrative is not a mirror image of the events in *Maus*, as “the events that go into the *mise en abyme* of the story, if any, will not be literally the same as those which will bring the story to a close” (Moshe 434). *Prisoner on the Hell Planet* closes with Art isolated from society, having been put in prison, because he cannot process the trauma inflicted by Anja’s death. *Maus*, on the other hand, closes with what was impossible in the *mise en abyme*: Art comes to terms with the past in that, he surmounts the Oedipal feelings associated with the trauma inflicted by his mother’s death and identifies with his father; and in this way, rejoins society.

Appendix A



(Spiegelman 160)

Appendix B



(Spiegelman 172)

Appendix C



(Spiegelman 86)

Appendix D



(Spiegelman 99-100)

Appendix E



(Spiegelman 86)



(Spiegelman 107)



(Spiegelman 160)

Appendix F



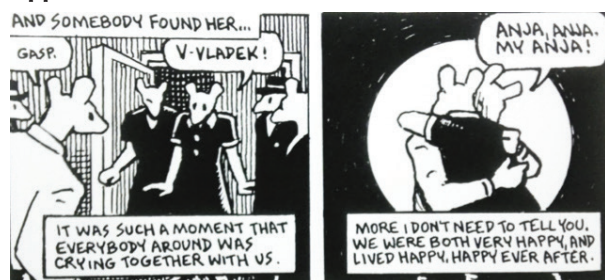
(Spiegelman 160)

Appendix G



(Spiegelman 201)

Appendix H



(Spiegelman 296)

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