Rubén Peinado Abarrio

"It's Enough Stories for Now:" Historical Representation in Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and Aleksandar Hemon's *The Lazarus Project*

This presentation deals with two contemporary literary works that develop first-person accounts of search for historical and personal knowledge. Art Spiegelman's comic book *Maus*, and Aleksandar Hemon's novel *The Lazarus Project*, explore the limits of representation of two of the most significant events in twentieth-century Europe, namely the Holocaust and the War in Bosnia and Herzegovina. With their mixture of self-referentiality and concern with history, both *Maus* and *The Lazarus Project* can be aptly considered faithful representatives of what Linda Hutcheon has called Historiographic Metafiction, one of the signature literary modes of the postmodern episteme.

Maus, published in two volumes in 1986 and 1991, respectively, offers an allegorical representation, in a graphic novel form, with characters depicted as anthropomorphic animals, of Vladek Spiegelman's hardships. Vladek is a Holocaust survivor who recounts the experiences of his Jewish family under the Nazi regime. His story is recorded and transcribed by his son, the comic book artist Artie Spiegelman, who plans to draw a graphic novel based upon Vladek's experiences.

On the other hand, *The Lazarus Project*, published in 2008, focuses on the figure of Brik, a Bosnian writer who arrives in America shortly before the war breaks out in his native country. Being the recipient of a grant to do research for his first novel, Brik travels through Western Europe accompanied by an old acquaintance, the Bosnian Muslim photographer Rora. Brik's project deals with the life and death of Lazarus Averbuch, a Russian Jew who survived the 1903 Kishinev pogrom and fled to Chicago. There, he was taken for an anarchist and died, under unusual circumstances, at the

hands of the local police chief. In addition, Aleksandar Hemon's novel contains a series of pictures taken by his close friend, Velibor Bozovic, which contribute to the cohesion of a novel that constantly leaps forward and backward in time.

These two metafictional texts follow the convention of the frame story: they present both the story that the authors aim to write, as previously described, and the process of writing – in this case, the first-person account of the psychological, emotional, physical, social and historical circumstances affecting Artie and Brik, the fictionalized authors.

Consequently, attention to the issue of representation is a key element in these historically conscious fictions. I am with historian Hayden White on stating that what makes *Maus* "one of the most moving narrative accounts of the [Holocaust]" is the way "it makes the difficulty of discovering and telling the whole truth about even a small part of it as much a part of the story as the events whose meaning it is seeking to discover" (31). As it happens in *The Lazarus Project*, this self-reflexivity is intrinsically intertwined with the traumatic events narrated.

A significant proof of the complexity of the question of truth in historical representation results from an analysis of the peculiarities of Hemon and Spiegelman's homodiegetic narrators. In *The Lazarus Project*, Hemon is willing to expose the construction of his fiction through the figure of Brik. Although Brik and Hemon share many biographical details – both are Bosnian writers and occasional teachers of EFL, both are grant recipients – the fictional Brik admits that some of the persons he describes during his travel with Rora are no more than characters with a specific role in the story he is telling; once they have "completed [their] purpose [...], exited this narrative" (Hemon 123). The book's closing Acknowledgment page speaks volumes about this issue:

Hemon mentions there a number of works he has consulted about the basic facts of the Lazarus affair, but he adds that his words are valid "to the extent that there are any facts in a work of ficton" (293).

On the other hand, the fact that Spiegelman does give his name and some of his personal features to his alter-ego in *Maus* does not render his choice unproblematic – not least because the real Art Spiegelman is not a mouse but a man. The fictionalized Spiegelman is a textual construction that exists only in the realm of the book, as the final page seems to suggest: under the drawing of his parents tombstones, we read Spiegelman's signature and the dates of the composition of *Maus*, "1978-1991." Thus, the last panels of the book show that the author's existence is relevant only as long as the process of composition of the book is open.

This confirms Roland Barthes's suspicion (echoed by historians Berel Lang and Hayden White in their analysis of historical emplotment) that, "in the modern verb of middle voice *to write*, the subject is constituted as immediately contemporary with the writing, being effected and affected by it: this is the exemplary case of the Proustean narrator, who exists only by writing, despite the references to a pseudo-memory" (Barthes cited in White 38). In other words, the author is not external to the action; he writes himself, so that writing becomes "a doing or making", i.e. a performative action.

To deal with the alleged unrepresentability of certain events, Della Pollock uses the concept "performative writing", where the meaning of the text is inherent to the process of writing (cited in Costello 24). I agree with Lisa Costello, who applies an extended version of this model to *Maus*; however, since events such as the Final Solution exceed any representation of them, Costello argues, content can never be left behind: Process and content must go hand in hand (24). Costello does not provide a detailed explanation to discern exactly what events fit into her "performative

memorialization" model. However, she points to the Holocaust as the quintessential "literal event" (as Hayden White would put it), i.e. an event characterized by its "accountability", in Vivian Patraka's words, or its "factualness" (cited in Costello 40), so that only through a denarrativized literal chronicle of the facts it comprises (if such an account is possible) can the resulting text be authentic and true.

Genocide is deemed, therefore, as one of the mass traumatic events that would call for a literal representation. A literal event, says White paraphrasing Berel Lang, is, apart from an event that really happened, "an event whose nature permits it to serve as a paradigm of the kind of event about which we can be permitted to speak only in a literal manner." Consequently, the use of figurative language would lead to the distortions of the facts (White 34). As a result, Lang proposes the previously mentioned middle voice, associated with modernist writing, as a valid mode of textual representation for such a historical event; this is a writing that, according to Lang, "denies the distances among the writer, text, what is written about, and, finally, the reader" (cited in White 37).

Lang defends that "For certain subjects […] their significance may be too broad or deep to be chanced by an individual point of view" (cited in White 35). This view makes me argue that the War in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the main subt-text in *The Lazarus Project,* represents one of those few other modern events that require a special treatment when turned into a text – mainly because this conflict was characterized by a number of atrocities such as genocide, ethnic cleansing and systematic mass rape and violence. It can be argued that *The Lazarus Project*, like *Maus*, expresses a new social experience through a new literary mode; as a consequence, it accomplishes the task of representing the kind of event that would be considered unrepresentable from the perspective of nineteenth-century realism.

Both Spiegelman and Hemon try to extract some meaning out of the study and emplotment of historical events. A typical postmodern issue is looming in their texts: are literature and history useful? "History fed nobody" (Hemon 156), according to a man who provides food and care for the elderly Jews in a Ukrainian town in *The Lazarus Project*; while "Books cannot be eaten" (Spiegelman 114) is the irrefutable statement of a starving Jew in the ghetto depicted by Spiegelman. Such claims remind us of a recurrent critique of the postmodern tendency to deem reality as text-constructed: reality may be so for academe, but violence, death, hunger, are real problems suffered by real people.

Which brings us back to the question of representation. How do we represent something that we cannot possibly understand? "Reality is too complex for comics" (Spiegelman 176), laments Artie in *Maus*, a text that insists on the idea of Auschwitz as an inconceivable event, a place where survival was a "random" issue (Spiegelman 89, 205); on a similar note, *The Lazarus Project* exposes the irrationality of a conflict where Serb husbands desert their Muslim wives to shoot at them from the mountains (Hemon 291).

I previously labeled the Bosnian War a sub-text because, unlike *Maus*, which is more explicitely the account of a Holocaust survivor ("A Survivor's Tale", as the subtitle announces), *The Lazarus Project* presents this story as apparently secondary to Brik's travel and his reconstruction of the Lazarus Averbuch affair. War is alluded, a constant presence that can be felt but that is rarely presented as the explicit focus of the narration.

Paradoxically enough, as a result of the net of allusions and correlations between Lazarus and Brik's stories, along with Bozovic's photographs, the Bosnian War is all the more felt in the book. For example, the idea of the ethnic cleansing performed by the

Bosnian Serb Army during the 1992-1995 period evokes the early-twentieth-century pogroms described by Hemon. Lazarus and his family become refugees after the 1903 Kishinev pogrom; they are victims of ethnic hatred, just like a remarkable share of Bosnian population in the early nineties.

The war that he has never witnessed, left alone fought, haunts Brik and lies at the heart of his existential problems, his ontological quest, his misadjustment in the United States. It seems that his eventual return to Sarajevo, renouncing his American life – which, negative as he may picture it, includes an American wife and the prospect of publishing a novel supported by a substantial grant – represents Brik's call for redemption for his absence during the siege of his birth place.

Brik's violent impulses stem, likewise, from his trauma, similar to that of war veterans but lived in second hand. His sadistic revenge on a pimp in Bucharest echoes Brik's fantasies about assaulting the Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic, charged with genocide and war crimes. Brik shows his "rage" and "fury" about what happened in Bosnia (Hemon 250-51) in a series of recurrent and apparently unconnected passages.

Similarly, *Maus* is rich in offering the terrible consequences of traumatic events as they affect Vladek – who, according to his son, didn't survive Auschwitz in many ways (Spiegelman 250) –, but also Artie. Born after World War II, he is a second-generation survivor, and the emotional and psychological effects of such a terrible event are his father's, and his people's, legacy. This is what Marianne Hirsch has called "postmemory" (cited in Costello 23), and its effects can be felt not only by the children of survivors, but by readers themselves, resulting in a "performative memorialization" (to borrow Lisa Costello's terminology) that appeals for the audience's empathy. Both Brik and Artie have to deal with the irrational guilt of not having taken part in those momentous events for their people, unlike Vladek (who survived the Holocaust),

Richieu (Artie's older brother, who lost his life in Europe) or Rora (the Muslim who survived a sieged Sarajevo).

Among the several methods used by first-person narrators in order to search for meaning in these unconceivable yet real events, storytelling, comprised by memory, experience and language, holds a prominent place. In *The Lazarus Project*, implausible stories are believed as long as they're "good" (Hemon 19). The importance of truth is undermined by its depiction as just another American commodity, in contrast with Bosnian storytelling, whose aim is pleasure rather than truth or information (Hemon102-3). Rora is Hemon's master storyteller. His far-fetched stories offer aphoristic knowledge about the Bosnian idiosyncrasy or the immigrant experience in America. Experience is valued over memory (Hemon 228), and Brik's intellectualism is deemed as insufficient in order to "pierce to the truth of experience", as a reviewer of the book puts it (Oates 168).

In *Maus*, the role of the storyteller is played by Vladek, who defends the supremacy of his experience and eyewitnessing over history books (Spiegelman 214). Unreliable as he may be in some passages, Vladek makes the plot move forward with his stories, facilitating the exposure of Artie's troubled relationship with his father, with the world, and with himself. The episodes that Vladek did not witness or does not recall, he either imagines or reconstructs from experience; what is suggested then is that the exact details of individual cases are not as important as the sense of injustice, horror and futility of life, that emanates from some individual anecdote, whether or not verifiable in every particular.

Despite all their efforts, both Artie and Brik appear regularly haunted by the fear of not being able to adequately convey the circumstances of the protagonists of their

narrations. They also try to avoid oversimplification, commonplaces or stereotypical characters (the foreign agitator in the case of Lazarus Averbuch, the mean old Jew in the case of Vladek).

However, by showing how Brik constructs the story of Lazarus from his own experiences, Hemon helps us understand that Brik is in fact writing about himself rather than about some event that took place a century ago – his is a process of self-discovery. Thus, it is little wonder that the narrative becomes quite explicitely an existential novel disguised as a postmodern pastiche.

On a similar note, the quest of the fictionalized Art Spiegelman becomes also a self-discovery issue, with its climax in the "Time flies" chapter, included in the second volume of *Maus*. Here, we find the author visiting his therapist and overtly discussing his puzzled relationship both with his recently deceased father and with the fame brought by the success of the first volume of *Maus*, while he exposes his troubles trying to make any sense out of Auschwitz. Consequently, this chapter conveys the image of a struggling artist coming to terms with his immediate past, both personally (through his relationship with Vladek) and socially or historically (through his depiction of a turning-point in Jewish history).

To sum up, we can conclude that Spiegelman and Hemon's works are a combination of the "intransitive writing" defended by Hayden White or Berel Lang as an apt mode of representation of realities such as the Holocaust or, I would argue, the Bosnian Genocide, with Linda Hutcheon's Historiographic Metafictions, i.e. self-referential works that problematize the question of historical knowledge.

Although attention to historical thoroughness seems, in relation to many passages, irrelevant at best, it is true that *Maus* and *The Lazarus Project* are embedded

in history. The knowledge they convey results from the dialectic confrontation between the troubled individual conscience and some historical events of particular significance due to their individual, familial or social implications, regardless of the degree of accuracy of the minutest details. In other words, to state that the siege of Sarajevo ended on 29 February, 1996, may be factually true, but it does not say as much about the meaning of the conflict as Rora's quite extravagant stories.

At the end of the reading of these texts, the prevailing feeling is that, as one character in *The Lazarus Projec*t puts it, "It was too late for answers" (Hemon 230). Vladek Spiegelman, in his closing remark in *Maus*, admits that "it's enough stories for now" (Spiegelman 296). These first-person narratives do not pretend to offer a coherent plot that searches for some irrefutable truth; nevertheless, they pose the right questions so as to help us achieve, if not inequivocal answers, at least some personal and historical awareness that we, the readers, and the characters and narrators of the stories, might have previously lacked.

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