

## My, His, Our Existence: Exploring Identity in Maus by Art Spiegelman

### *Mi, su, nuestra existencia: Explorando identidad en Maus de Art Spiegelman*

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*From sheer habit to the most sophisticated artistic expression, our experiences are informed by what we have  
previously lived.  
Rockwell Gray, Autobiography Now*

#### **Abstract**

Creative writing: a door to freedom? Or perhaps the way into a complicated situation. Whether it is intended for the broadest audience or even if it is simply for personal insight, writing per se serves to explore and question. Just as the main character in *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* might suggest, personally plunging into the writing process can be as rewarding as much as it can be challenging. The present paper aims to delve into the ways in which a creative response writing based on said graphic novel could bring to light certain core aspects related to identity and personal liberty. Namely, storytelling and present time, the Self/Other and stereotypes, and artistic devices and choice. With the purpose of exploring the dynamic nature of identity and its constant negotiation not only within close relationships but also in society, fragments selected from the graphic novel and from an example of a creative response writing will be analysed. The main focus will be on writing as a trigger, as empowerment and as a way to connect to a cosmopolitan audience in the hope of further discussion.

**Keywords:** creative writing, graphic novel, identity

#### **Resumen**

*La escritura creativa: ¿una puerta a la libertad? O tal vez el camino hacia una situación complicada. Ya sea que esté destinado al público más amplio o incluso si es tan solo para reflexión personal, escribir per se sirve para explorar y cuestionar. Del mismo modo que el personaje principal de Maus: A Survivor's Tale podría sugerir, zambullirse personalmente en el proceso de escritura puede ser tanto una recompensa como todo un desafío. La intención del presente artículo será indagar en las maneras en que una escritura de respuesta creativa basada en dicha novela gráfica puede revelar ciertos aspectos centrales relacionados con la identidad y la libertad personal. A saber, la narración y el tiempo presente, uno mismo/el otro y los estereotipos, y los recursos artísticos y la elección. Con el propósito de explorar la naturaleza dinámica de la identidad y su constante negociación no solo dentro de las relaciones cercanas sino también en sociedad, se analizarán fragmentos seleccionados de la novela gráfica y de un ejemplo de escritura de respuesta creativa. El foco principal estará en la escritura cual disparador, como empoderamiento y como una manera de conectar con un público cosmopolita con la esperanza de futuros debates.*

**Palabras clave:** escritura creativa, novela gráfica, identidad

## Introduction

To what extent does Literature call for an active engagement? If the reading of an original work is most definitely an exercise of interpretation and a way into the pondering of certain concepts or themes, it is the writing connected to that reading which can prove to be even more rewarding. Rewarding not just in the actual production of a piece of work -which need not be restricted to academic writing- but in terms of a more comprehensive understanding of matters presented in the world of Literature. During the writing of a creative response, the individual has to consider their own interpretations and they have to create their own piece of writing about, through and inspired by this original literary work. In a sense, this process of appropriation allows for the reader to become an author. Whatever the individual produces at this point is for themselves and their personal growth, regardless of whether the piece of writing is intended for actual publication. By pushing oneself into the creative process, the individual explores a kind of literary agency which is a factor of utmost importance in the construction of a person's identity and their sense of personal liberty. In order to explore this process through the analysis of sources, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* by Art Spiegelman has been chosen for this paper -both its first part *My Father Bleeds History* (1986) and its second part *And Here My Troubles Began* (1991). Presented as a sort of auto/biography, *Maus* is the 'comic' story of Art who lives in New York and who has decided to write about his father and the Jewish Holocaust. His work is to be a fictionalised version of the memories his father tells him as a survivor of those times. In the midst of this attempt, Art finds himself struggling with numerous issues which include his relation to his Jewish ancestry and more familial circumstances which bring to question the father-son bonding and the nature of existence and the self. Art Spiegelman has himself also written a book called *MetaMaus: A Look Inside a Modern Classic* where he discusses key aspects of his graphic novel which include the reasons behind his choice of human-mice to represent Jewish people and the choice of the Jewish Holocaust as the main historical subject, among other matters. Ever so humbly, this paper does not aim to perform an exhaustive description or analysis of the former kind. Bearing in mind the complexity of *Maus* as a literary work, the intention of the present paper is to show how a creative response writing based on said graphic novel can bring to light certain core aspects related to identity and personal liberty. In an

introspective turn, aspects of *Maus* will be analysed by making reference to the graphic novel and also to a short piece written by myself as a creative response. This short piece entitled *My, His, Our Existence* (See Appendix 1) is a simple dialogue between two characters based on those of Art and Françoise from the original novel and it is written as if it were a potential continuation from the last phrase spoken by Art's father in the graphic novel: "I'm tired from talking, Richieu, and it's enough stories for now." [Vol.II p.136] (See Fig. 1).



Figure 1. Panel from Vol.II p.136

Certain fragments from *My, His, Our Existence* have been selected due to their way of portraying a particular understanding of the graphic novel, serving as cues to delve into issues presented in *Maus*. Regarding the graphic novel itself, quotes and panels have been chosen to further explore these matters. The combination of all of these fragments will be analysed by focusing on the construction of identity and its relation to storytelling, memories and the dialectical relation to present time, as well as the impact

of stereotypes on the conceptualization and understanding of the Self and the Other. Thriving on textual interpretation and appropriation, said analysis has called my attention to the use of artistic devices and this has eventually prompted me to consider my own self-awareness and critical thinking. Thus, as a final comment, brief personal insight will be shared concerning the actual process of writing which can indeed prove to be as daunting as it can be rewarding.

## Analysis of the Sources

### 1. *Storytelling, Memories and their Dialectic Relation with Present Time*

Whether we are aware of it or not, it would seem as if we often find ourselves engaged in activities that bring us to existence and justify our place in the world. These activities could be seen as autobiographical work and they could be understood as a process that Gray defines as “any reflective effort made in the interest of giving or restoring meaning, purpose, and value to one’s life.” (p.33). This would be something that we as humans are capable of and are actually doing constantly throughout our lives. It should be noted that this definition is not restricted to the actual writing of one’s biography in a published work, which is what may be readily associated with the word. Autobiographical work includes diary entries or journal keeping, the act of engaging in conversation with others and, in fact, not just talking but also the mere act of thinking about ourselves and our lives. As a matter of fact, storytelling and addressing our memories might as well be a way of experiencing this process, which is a way of exploring our subjectivity. Yet, our lives are marked by time and this might not always be straightforwardly easily to understand. In *Maus*, the past is constantly present in the present time in which Art takes notes and records his father’s memories from the war. As Vladek’s storytelling serves to illustrate how memory may well work, it is interesting to consider the way in which one person’s past may affect another person’s present. The past stops being seen as a picture to be fished out of a diluted memory lane at will and becomes an effervescent constant in the construction of the present. In these particular father-and-son moments, is it evident how storytelling becomes a sort of framing along which personal and family identities are negotiated. In the last panels of the graphic novel, Vladek dismisses Art by telling him about the moment after the war is over when he was finally reunited with Anja, Art’s mother: “More I don’t need to tell you. We were both very happy, and lived happy, happy ever after.”

[Vol.II p.136] (See **Fig. 1**) In the following panel, claiming to be very tired, he asks to stop the tape recorder and he then calls Art by the name of his other son, Richieu. Inadvertently, it would seem that by remembering and talking about his past, Vladek’s mind has somehow stayed in those happy times, as if refusing to lend credence to the present here-and-now which, painful for him or not, is actually the here-and-now he is sharing with Art.

Remarkably, while this storytelling appears to suit Vladek, it results in Art’s own alienation. One interpretation of this situation could be that Vladek has unintentionally challenged Art’s identity, not only because Art did not exist during those times of war but because Vladek actually calls Art by the name of the son that did exist then. Could Art perceive this temporary name confusion as a threat to his own existence? This is brought into question from the beginning of the creative response writing *My, His, Our Existence* when the character based on Art wonders in rage: “What am I doing? Retelling an old man’s story. Caring about somebody who cannot even remember his own son’s name properly!” In these words, Art seems to want a separation from his father’s life out of momentary spite because there is a break in the familial bonding he has been constructing, deconstructing and trying to deal with in general. This thought stems from the particular interpretation that Art, in a sense, is fighting for his own right to exist as well, all throughout the graphic novel. There would seem to be many individuals and situations that challenge Art’s existence. He has to fight a ghost brother, he has to fight his own father and he has to fight the Jewish Holocaust. Could this be related to what Gray describes as the “assertion of ego in an insecure world, a search for personal power when one fears the eclipse of the individual person, a way to define identity.” (p.31-32)? Indeed, the title of the creative response writing mentions different kinds of existences and aims to draw attention to this multiplicity of identities and their possible relations. Richieu, born in a past which might be difficult for Vladek to actually see in the present on his own, becomes the interrupted life of a son that would stay in his mind forever. As a promise of possibilities without actual realisation, this first son becomes a life that has not had the chance to make mistakes because it has not had a chance at life at all. On the other hand, Art has never seen Richieu but via storytelling and there appears to be nothing real about him but a photograph. Nevertheless, he perceives him as a constant threat as he confesses in the graphic novel: “My ghost-brother (..) The photo never

threw tantrums or got into any kind of trouble... It was an ideal kid and I was a pain in the ass. I couldn't compete. (...) They didn't talk about Richieu, but that photo was a kind of reproach." [Vol.II p.15].

At the same time, Art could be competing with Vladek himself as it is shown in *My, His, Our Existence* where the character based on Art claims that he cannot live because his father "already exists too much." This phrase summarizes what could be one interpretation of Art's opinion of Vladek since, throughout the graphic novel, he seems to find him a difficult person to be around and he seems to struggle with his status as a survivor. If only Art could manage to swerve comparisons and free himself from the guilt he feels from having what could be otherwise labeled as an easy life -not having actually lived through the war and the Jewish Holocaust. In the graphic novel, the feeling of guilt is evident when he claims: "No matter what I accomplish, it doesn't seem like much compared to surviving Auschwitz." [Vol.II p.44]. But if his father's past threatens Art's own present, Art's own life, in turn, affects his father's. For instance, when they discuss Art's comic about his mother's suicide, Vladek comments: "It's good you got it outside your system. But for me it brought in my mind so much memories of Anja." [Vol.I p.04]. In this continuous father-and-son exchange regarding the past, these two characters are exploring their own stories and identities. They are not only doing it on their own, they are talking to each other about it which definitely triggers certain emotions and further insight. The fact that Art is actually going through this process by writing is his own struggle. Further consideration of Ravelo's phrase "In *Maus* there are as many wars as anecdotes being retold." (p.21) could make the reader entertain the following thought: these wars are often psychological and within the self. As Art's psychologist suggests, Art is also a kind of survivor: "...the real survivor." [Vol.II p.44]. He might feel alienated from his father's world, but his father's past is present in him and the struggle to embrace it is intriguing. Writing becomes the way by which he attempts to understand himself and his surroundings. In this sense, Anja is another interesting character. Art's mother kept journals perhaps in the hope of finding in this sort of writing a way of coping with the hardships of the time. Even though this matter will not be explored in detail in this paper, the topic of writing as therapeutic should yield interesting analyses. In any case, as the story in *Maus* unfolds, the reader is suddenly told that Vladek has burnt these journals. This drives Art mad. Undoubtedly, he considered them valuable material. Those records, that storytelling from another teller, could

have given Art (and through him, given to his readers) an alternative narrative to challenge the 'single story' told in Vladek's own accounts.

## 2. The Conceptualization of the Self, the Other and Stereotypes

As regards subjectivity and the construction of identity, a concept which is worth bearing in mind is that of the Other -the existence of an individual that is not me, myself. As proposed by Lacan in The Mirror Stage, we begin to conceive the idea of ourselves as individuals with a Self and a potential from the moment we are capable of identifying our own bodies in front of a mirror. That is the moment when "le je se précipite en une forme primordiale, avant qu'il ne s'objective dans la dialectique de l'identification à l'autre et que le langage ne lui restitue dans l'universel sa fonction de sujet." (p.450)<sup>1</sup> This stage constitutes the basis of the way we will deal with identifications during our lives. In a sense, it is an experience similar to that which will be happening to us from that moment on. One way or another, any other individual that is not us will, from that point onwards, serve a sort of mirror on which we can see ourselves, so as to identify with or against them. In *My, His, Our Existence*, the character based on Art resents his father's "manic need to control everything, to take advantage of everything, to find the best way to really use up every single thing, every single penny," and lets out quite the sardonic comment when he insists "Let's keep saving up money in the bank and never, ever enjoying it." Art is expressing his difference with two different kinds of Other: one is Vladek, his father, and the other is the cultural representations of war survivors and the Jewish community in association with a certain kind of personality. A personality thought up as the social perception of thrifty methods of survival or as exaggerated and intentionally suggested by propaganda. Art seems unable to identify with his own father's way of living and this could present the possibility for Art to actually think about his own way of living. Indeed, this could be the result of his confusion stemming from being an individual that encompasses both a self containing Jewish ancestry -including Vladek's story which he still struggles to understand- and an identity as a present citizen of the United States where such stereotypes roam freely. The articulation of these matters as interpreted

<sup>1</sup> English translation taken from Bert (2005): "the I is precipitated in a primordial form, before it is objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject." (p.3)



from the original work into the creative writing response echoes the many moments in the graphic novel when Art becomes annoyed by his father. What is brilliantly hard to tell is whether that which annoys him stems from the war survivor or from Vladek's actual personality.

In a broader sense, it could be said that a powerful sort of collective mirror are stereotypes in general. As we potentially see ourselves as belonging or not belonging to a group, this could affect the way we see ourselves and others. Since stereotypes are rather reductive portrayals of human beings, by foregrounding or exaggerating certain aspects -be those physical or personality traits-, individuals or a group of individuals are deprived of their complexity. As Adichie mentions, "the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story." (12'45") How does this affect the view of the Other, and how does it affect the view of the Self? Regarding the Jewish stereotype, throughout the novel other characters who are also survivors of the war do not necessarily act as Vladek. The fact that they do not identify with his behaviour literally introduces 'other stories'. For instance, during a discussion that Art has with Mala -the woman Vladek has seemingly chosen to spend his life next to after Anja-, Mala cries: "Fah! I went through the camps... All of our friends went through the camps. Nobody is like him!" [Vol.I p.131]. Then, in his considerations, Art says: "I used to think the war made him that way.." [Vol.I p.131]. Could this be a way of challenging stereotypes by suggesting that Vladek has somehow always been the way he is, despite the war and, indeed, regardless of the fact that he is Jewish? What is interesting to see in the context of this graphic novel is the way this is linked to the conceptualization of the Self and the stereotype. At one particular moment, Art is also discussing this with Mala and he says: "...it's something that worries me about the book I'm doing about him... In some ways he's just like the racist caricature of the miserly old jew. (..) I mean, I'm just trying to portray my father accurately!.." [Vol.I p.131-132]. Art appears concerned about this potentially reductive portrayal of a group of individuals and struggles with the stereotype and the complexity of this father as an individual. At the same time, it could be said that he seems to be aware of the impact that a work of literature such as the one he is working on could have in society. This could readily be associated to the idea of "culture industry" dealt by Adorno and Horkheimer who suggest that certain works of culture might as well be produced as commodities for people to

consume. These would be used to manipulate society into a numbed state of passivity: "Insofar as cartoons do any more than accustom the senses to the new tempo, they hammer into every brain the old lesson that continuous friction, the breaking down of all individual resistance, is the condition of life in this society. Donald Duck in the cartoons and the unfortunate in real life get their thrashing so that the audience can learn to take their own punishment." (p.10) On the other hand, "authentic culture" should urge their audience to think about themselves and their surroundings regarding deep psychological matters such as freedom or the actual definition of happiness. Could *Maus* be another factory produced standard cultural good, or rather at some point an un/familiar voice, an exploration of choice, a space granted for the audience to dwell on these matters?

Another brief reference to stereotypes is one related to viewing all cultural forms of art as standing in opposition to pragmatism or functionality. As Art mentions to Françoise, his wife, his decision to become an artist is not out of random spite and is actually related to his father Vladek who, as Art describes in the graphic novel, takes pride in his persistent proficiency at fixing things. Art admits, "One reason I became an artist was that he thought it was impractical -just a waste of time.." [Vol.I p.97] and then he adds "it was an area where I wouldn't have to compete with him." [Vol.I p.97] (this latter comment is related to the matter dealt with in the previous section). While it could be said that there is a certain misconception about the artistic easily serving no purpose in the everyday practical world, in *Maus*'s case -as the complex work that it is- as in many other cases, the artistic could be purposefully breaking ground. The undertaking of writing a story based on events originally learned through somebody else is pushing the artist-author to think more deeply about the reliability of accounts and ultimately about the narrative choices. Even a specific matter concerning graphic novels could make the artist-author wonder about the possible use of generalizations and the portrayal of individuals. At the beginning of Part II, Art and Françoise exchange a few comments about the drawings that would embody the fictionalization of Vladek's memories. She asks Art "What are you doing?" and he replies "Trying to figure out how to draw you." [Vol.II p.11]. If Françoise, who is French but has converted to Judaism, is to be drawn as a mouse, Art finds himself in a conundrum when he has to decide which animal to choose for the drawing of French people in general. Art, the fictional character in *Maus*, makes reference to his weariness about his writing of

memoirs' project in what could be an autobiographical echo. This might allude to what Art Spiegelman, the author of *Maus*, might have actually experienced. "Just thinking about my book.. it's so presumptuous of me. I mean, I can't even make any sense out of my relationship with my father... How am I supposed to make any sense out of Auschwitz?.. Out of the Holocaust?.." [Vol.II p.14] It is inspiring how the engagement in a creative writing allows a fictional character based on a real person to express and shape feelings into actual words.

### 3. Artistic Devices, Choice and Personal Liberty

What is identity if not the freedom to be and actually express ourselves? A specific panel in the graphic novel has been selected for this paper due to the way it was considered that Spiegelman, in ever so disturbingly witty a way, worked with image juxtaposition. As Vladek is telling Art about the moment when he found himself back to working as a tin man, he explains that "When the Russians came near, the Germans made ready to run from Auschwitz. They needed tinmen to pull apart the machineries of the gas chambers." [Vol.II p.69] (See **Fig. 2**). In present time, Art and Vladek are sitting in the dining room having tea and coffee. Vladek is talking. Art is smoking and listening to him. Vladek continues "They wanted to pack it all to Germany. There they could take also all of the jews to finish them in quiet." [Vol.II p.69] What suddenly strikes the reader (or perhaps it did before even reading the words in this panel) is that the smoke from the cigarette might be part of another scenario. One panel shows Vladek talking to Art, who is smoking a cigarette, and the panel that is immediately beneath surprises the reader with the drawing of a crematorium tower. This crematorium tower actually breaks into the panel of said dining room scenario. The smoke from Art's cigarette appears to be the same smoke that is coming out from the tower. The cigarette and the smoke have now acquired a completely resigified meaning. As Baccolini and Zanettin mention in an interesting essay that explores the voicing of trauma: "Details allow Spiegelman to come close to representing the unimaginable and to collapsing the past into the present.." (p.113) It is overwhelming how easily such a catastrophic event in history can be linked to an everyday action. Within the medium of graphic novels, this juxtaposition is an example of what can be done with artistic devices to express the way thoughts and memory may work.



Figure 2. Panel from Vol.II p.69

As a matter of fact, the smoke and the cigarette are present throughout the graphic novel. The specific interaction between panels described in the previous paragraph has definitely served as an inspiration for the writing of the creative response writing piece *My, His, Our Existence*. In the latter, where the characters are based on two characters from the original work who are both smokers, there is a whole play happening with the cigarettes: the lighting up, the sharing, the moving around, the inhaling and exhaling at different speeds and times and the putting out of each cigarette. As if the words chosen to describe actual body postures and intentions were not enough, the movements of the cigarettes could be read on their own as an expression of language. Françoise appears to be what could be considered a good listener, carefully creating a comfortable environment for Art and encouraging him to be himself. As for Art, he looks as if he were the actual cigarette burning up at all haste, then managing to catch his breath with the help of Françoise. In a way, the cigarette seems to express Art's eagerness: the way he feels about this writing project which

is making him work with his father, his anxiety towards his own situation, and his relationship with Françoise. On a personal note related to eagerness, I must admit that engaging in a creative response writing was a challenging experience. Reading *Maus* and having to incorporate it to my own views of life by writing a creative piece based on it allowed me to turn towards myself and my own identity construction. If only to mention the most clichéd of matters, I found myself thinking of the following: Could I write drama? Could I call myself a writer one day? Would you consider me a writer if I only wrote for myself? The construction of this piece and of the present paper as well has helped to open up possible negotiations within myself that directly have an impact on my daily life. Exploring this deconstruction of my own personality has rendered me more sensitive, even more curious to matters related to psychology, sociology and anthropology. If anything, it has allowed me to realise to what extent I have actually tried to go into the story by letting some writing like this creative writing come into existence. During this appropriation, I could resignify concepts and I realised that this became my own account. I was free to express myself and my own story in relation to the graphic novel, the story and the historical background. Yet, freedom appears to be dictated by critical thinking. Is personal liberty not directly linked to an individual's perception of those subjects which allow a plurality of voices and a constant revisitation and re-evaluation of its themes? Plurality allows for more than one correct option and the making of a choice -or of even multiple choices. Being exposed to different accounts of stories, each with its own complexity, and acknowledging that each of these is one amongst many, implies that freedom of choice. Pondering over the existence of this diversity in Literature and the subjects dealt with in original works may push the individual to think of the possibilities of other options in other aspects of their lives. As Art is presented with the possibility of another account with Anja's journals, we as readers could be expected to understand this as the possibility of another -from an Other- reality in general. Whenever we are faced with an option, or more than two options, we might see how these accounts might be intertwined. In Art's case, there is a rather expected possibility that the two versions of what happened during those times will not be identical. At some point, Vladek's accounts and Anja's accounts could become two conflicting versions of the same event. As the receptor of these stories, Art would have to choose which one to believe in, or what aspects from each one to keep and what

other aspects to discard. In order to analyse this, Art would have to engage in critical thinking which boosts independent thought. This would further boost self-awareness which is related to identity construction along with the sense of personal liberty.

### Concluding Remarks

Engaging in creative response writing not only works with an individual's reading and interpreting of a literary work, it actually leads to an artistic and conceptual appropriation. Active engagement of this kind may truly compel the individual to consider their self-awareness and ponder over their own identities: by intending to internalise a story, resignifying themes and playing with artistic and literary devices, the individual is exercising personal appropriation in order to create something on their own. This act of re-creation inevitably lends a greater sense of agency upon the entire subject, which may thus become an important factor in terms of their personal liberty. Since a creative response writing experience might draw the individual to consider an extra psychological layer that would affect the way they conceptualise matters concerning their experiences, memories, ideas and ideals, this affects the way not only the personal Self is conceived but also that of others. What once again seems important to highlight is the discourse aspect of these literary actions, these somehow autobiographical works. The decision to share my experience with creative response writing stems from the belief that it has helped me to dive further into certain matters that were originally mentioned in the graphic novel. While I am not necessarily advocating for every single individual to push themselves into the workings of even future copyrighted material, I would encourage all of us to take a step further, appropriate every piece of literary work and share whatever ideas might spring from that reading. Intending to share makes a difference. The consideration of an audience gives the work a specific purpose and calls for either specific wording or overall format, even if it is just a comment in an everyday discussion. The possibility of actual feedback from an Other can make us rethink our interpretations. Ultimately, it could be argued that being self-aware is not only a way of dealing with ourselves but also a way of dealing with others around us. An individual who is critical about the way they live and act will find themselves questioning behaviours or sudden norms that might be threatening to themselves or actually threatening to others. In turn, the incapability of introspection and critical thinking could be seen as a dangerous way of



becoming insensitive to others.

In *Maus*, the reader actually gets a glance at the artistic process and how thought-provoking it can be for the artist. As a matter of fact, the work could be said to actually hint at the possible productivity of a literary work (or any work of art in general) in terms of questioning and critical thinking. As it is also shown in the graphic novel, the process of artistic creation -and recreation- might include introspection and going through sensitive moments of self-doubt. Writing or drawing, as in this case of *Maus* being a graphic novel, can be a way to voice out thoughts in order to break free from -or at least call for a dialogue with- the past, with ideals of the Self and with social expectations. Writing need not only be a way of showing, but also a way of finding and addressing a matter. Ultimately, issues dealt in *Maus* range from the Jewish Holocaust and its consequences to matters which could be said should be present in every human being's life. What is interesting to consider, once again, is the fact that our memory and our identities are related not only with what has actually happened to ourselves but with the stories around us. With artistic appropriation, which we might as well do without even noticing, we not only read and think of possible interpretations of a text -of a life- we are forced to be present and we have to use our own creativity. This is the process I personally went through during the production of a creative response writing that was related to *Maus*. In this second instance of appropriation (the first instance being Art's own work on the fictionalization of his father's memories), I found myself being able to recontextualise, resignify and elaborate on certain issues dealt with in the graphic novel. Writing a creative response piece was a way of actively engaging with *Maus* which, in some sense, also helped me develop further agency. The fact that I was curious enough to continue developing this on a different kind of writing, an academic paper, allowed me to explore other aspects of my identity as well. It has introduced me to more instances of questioning, to the possibility of more 'stories' and to the expectation of a broader diversity of choices. This, in turn, has granted me what I have come to understand as a greater sense of personal liberty.

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## Appendix

### *My, His, Our Existence*

(Creative Response Writing by Maria Victoria Sartor)

*[In the kitchen, Françoise is sitting in one of two chairs by a dinner table. On the table, there is an unremarkable, square, metallic ashtray. Next to the ashtray, an equally unremarkable lighter. There is also, indeed, a pack of cigarettes. Françoise looks relaxed. She is about to put out her almost finished cigarette when Artie storms in. He saunters in unsteadily, one hand pressing against his right lobe, the other shaking an overgripped notebook. He stops short in front of Françoise and lets his hair breathe. He stands next to the table. He stands as if he had just entered a live stage and as if he were waiting for the limelight to catch up with his hastiness. Suddenly, he pushes his notebook onto the table. Not for one instant does he avert his gaze from Françoise. Françoise, in turn, has yet to let go of her practically-burnt-out cigarette. He then stands even more upright and, as if addressing a massive audience, he opens the scene with a cascade of cries.]*

That's it! I'm out! I'm not going on with this! *[He looks around as if wanting to look at each member of his audience in the eye.]* What am I doing? Retelling an old man's story. Caring about somebody who cannot even remember his own son's name properly!

*[She finally puts out her cigarette. She points to the chair next to her and then begins to light up a cigarette for him.]*

What happened?

Why do I even bother? *[He shakes his head in an exaggerated manner and finally lets himself fall into rather than onto the chair being pointed at.]* Trying to understand my mother's twisted sense of life after hell is hard enough already, and now I keep trying to draw something I cannot even *[He sighs.]* Forget it.

Artie, honey, what happened? *[She extends her arm, lit cigarette in hand, towards him.]*

He's just. Ah.

Well?

Look. I just don't exist there, in his world. In his here. I'm just

the person he gets to call when he's driven everyone else away. He knows he can call me. And I don't exist because he- He already exists too much.

Well... *[She tries not to nod in compliance.]*

I try my best not to get trapped in his manic need to control everything, to take advantage of everything, to find the best way to really use up every single thing, every single penny. Let's keep accumulating useless things. Let's keep saving up money in the bank and never, ever enjoy it. *[He finally notices and takes the cigarette that Françoise has been holding for him expectantly.]* Thanks. *[He takes one long drag.]* I mean, *[He exhales the smoke rather hurriedly.]* I have a life, right? But no, I just can't live it because he has to control everything, even the clothes I wear. He seriously threw away my coat that time. And- And the guy actually burnt my mother's journals. They were all I had! *[He takes another long drag and says the following words through the exhaling smoke]* He killed her- Artie, take it easy, you just had a rough day. *[Now she lights up her own cigarette.]* I'd say-

*[Interrupting]* He said. He said, and I quote *[He takes one second and last hurried drag of his cigarette even though there is still more to burn, puts it out almost missing the ashtray, exhales and fills up his lungs with new air to pronounce the following words distinctly. Again, as if knowingly in front of an impressive audience.]* "I'm tired from talking, Richieu, and it's enough stories for now." *[He pauses as if for dramatic effect.]* Richieu. Really. *[He grabs the cigarette pack and begins to light another cigarette.]* Hm.

I can't help him. *[His eyes are looking for a fixed point at which to stare but fail to do so.]*

*[Françoise crosses one leg over the other, still holding her cigarette which keeps burning. She takes a moment. Then, softly]* Just-

*[Interrupting once again]* I mean, really. Am I supposed to stop my life? Sometimes I cannot bear to be around the guy, he's too much. *[He exhales through a mixture of sadness and confusion.]*

I know, sometimes he gets me anxious just because he's anxious. But, and I hate to say this, he's your father and he truly cares about you, honey.

Does he? 'cause I'm sure not Richieu.

*[She chimes in suddenly]* Oh, you can cut it out with the

self pity.

*[He looks at her fixedly, half squinting through the smoke.]*

Right. *[He seats back on the full back of the seat, vexed, as if half pretending to or actually considering Françoise's words.]*

He's clearly been through a lot.

*[Suddenly, he seats upright. Half his body begins to push over the table.]* And what about me? *[He points at himself, at his face, too closely with the hand holding the cigarette. He feels the heat and the smoke half aiming at his eyes.]* I'm tired of dealing with a ghostly immortal perfect brother and the seemingly manipulative jewish stereotype. *[He finishes the sentence and takes a minute. He takes another long drag. His eyes are wide open, almost burning. He draws a full gasp of air in and out of his lungs without blinking.]*

No. Listen. Listen to me. I'm telling you. He's impossible. And I don't even know why I bother. I should be focusing on our lives, focusing on us, our future. I can't move forward because he keeps pushing me back.

Artie, look at me. *[She takes on a long drag in a calmly manner while her eyes, at the same time, suggest some anxiety.]* What you are working on is not easy.

I don't know what to do, Françoise.

Well, you don't have to know. You keep trying to do whatever best you can. *[She puts out her cigarette softly and looks at him with a little smile.]* Whether he's always been like this or whether the war has changed him, it doesn't matter. And I know you love him, and I know it's hard, but there's nothing wrong with that. *[He considers her words while absent-mindedly putting out his cigarette in the ashtray.]*

And there's nothing simple about it either.