

**The Silence of the Mothers:
Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and Philippe Claudel's *Brodeck***

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ABSTRACT

The article offers a comparative reading of Spiegelman's *Maus* (1980–1991) and Claudel's *Brodeck* [*Le Rapport de Brodeck*] (2007). Separated by their formal differences and autobiographical/fictional contingencies, the two narratives are united by their postmodern aura. They also appear to promulgate the well-documented marginalisation of the feminine perspective in Holocaust literature. I argue, however, that *Maus* and *Brodeck* simultaneously embrace and challenge the tradition of Holocaust writing that privileges the male perspective and reduces women to the stereotype of helplessness and silent domesticity. They achieve this by foregrounding the liminalisation of women's experience of Nazi persecution and relating the distinctiveness of Jewish women's ordeal to their sexuality, and in particular to their roles as child bearers and main child carers. Additionally, Claudel's and Spiegelman's engagement with canonical texts of European culture (e.g. the myths of Philomela or Orpheus and Euridice) points to the entrenchment of gender stereotypes which ultimately contributed to the sexism of Nazi policies.

It is time to let mothers have their say.

Susan Rubin Suleiman¹

The silence of women survivors

In May 1942, the chronicler of the Warsaw Ghetto, Emanuel Ringelblum, wrote that '[t]he story of the Jewish woman [would] be a glorious page in the history of Jewry during the present war.'² This, however, has hardly been the case. Until the advent of feminist Holocaust scholarship in the late 1980s, historians had downplayed the importance of gender, their implicit assumption being that women and men suffered in essentially the same way. Consequently, although 'the concentration camp is,' as Myrna Goldberg argues, 'an ultimate expression of the extreme masculinity and misogyny that undergirded Nazi ideology,'³ women's lives, in Joan Ringelheim's words, have been 'neutralised into a so-called "human perspective," which on examination turns out to be a masculine one.'⁴ This view is shared by Sara Horowitz, for whom the master narrative of the Holocaust 'reflects the male voice, the male experience, the male memory as normative,'⁵ and by Ronit Lentin who speaks of a 'deafening silence' enveloping the link between gender and genocide in relation to the Shoah.⁶ That these claims are not groundless is corroborated by, for example, the position of prominent Holocaust analyst, Lawrence Langer. He maintains that the two sexes were united by the ultimate sense of loss which is 'beyond

¹ Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Risking Who One Is: Encounters with Contemporary Art and Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 21.

² Ringelblum was a social historian and founder of the group Oneg Shabbat dedicated to documenting the life in the Warsaw ghetto. He initiated the ghetto archives within a month of the German invasion of Poland. Emanuel Ringelblum, *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto: Journal of Emanuel Ringelblum*, ed. and trans. Jacob Sloan (New York: Schocken, 1974), pp. 273–74.

³ Myrna Goldenberg, "Different Horrors, Same Hell: Women Remembering the Holocaust," in Roger S. Gotlieb (ed.), *Thinking the Unthinkable: Meanings of the Holocaust* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1990), pp. 150–66 (p. 163).

⁴ Joan Ringelheim, "The Unethical and the Unspeakable: Women and the Holocaust," in Neil Levi and Michael Rothberg (eds.), *The Holocaust: Theoretical Readings* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp. 169–77 (pp. 169–70).

⁵ Sara R. Horowitz, "Gender, Genocide, and Jewish Memory," *Prooftexts*, vol. 20, no. 1–2 (Winter/Spring 2000): pp. 159–90 (p. 159).

⁶ Ronit Lentin, "Expected to Live: Women Shoah Survivors' Testimonials of Silence," *Women's Studies International Forum*, vol. 22, no. 6 (2000): pp. 689–700 (p. 693).

gender,⁷ while Holocaust survivor and historian, Helen Fagin, claims that a feminist agenda carries the risk of trivializing the Jewish tragedy.⁸ More militant still is Gabriel Schoenfeld who calls the gendered approach to the Holocaust ‘propaganda’ and describes feminist writings on the subject as ‘execrable’ and characterised by ‘notes of querulousness and righteous self-regard.’⁹ Others claim that ‘rape, abortion, sexual exploitation, and pregnancy are always potentially part of a woman’s life,’ or that ‘discussions of sexuality desecrate the memory of the dead [...] or the Holocaust itself.’¹⁰ Notwithstanding these reservations regarding the female perspective on the Nazi genocide, its advancement is now inevitable, as is obvious from the publication of works by Dalia Ofer, Esther Hertzog, Zoë Waxman, Judith Tydor Baumel, Lillian Kremer, and others.¹¹

The liminality of a gendered approach to the study of the Holocaust has been reflected by literature, where the canon is made up almost uniquely of writings by male authors, such as Primo Levi, Tadeusz Borowski, Paul Celan, Jerzy Kosinski, Jean Améry, Robert Antelme, Jorge Semprun, or Eli Wiesel. Due to

⁷ Lawrence L. Langer, “Gendered Suffering? Women in Holocaust Testimonies,” in Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (eds.), *Women in the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 351–363 (p. 362).

⁸ Quoted by Zoë Waxman, *Women in the Holocaust: A Feminist History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 4–5.

⁹ Gabriel Schoenfeld, “Auschwitz and the Professors,” *Commentary*, vol. 105–106 (June 1998): pp. 42–6. Quoted by Waxman, p. 5.

¹⁰ Joan Ringelheim, “The Split between Gender and the Holocaust,” in Ofer and Weitzman, pp. 340–50 (p. 345).

¹¹ Joan Ringelheim, “Thoughts about Women and the Holocaust,” in Gotlieb (ed.), *Thinking the Unthinkable: Meanings of the Holocaust*, pp. 150–66; Robin Ruth Linden, *Making Stories, Making Selves: Feminist Reflections on the Holocaust* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1993); Brana Gurewitsch (ed.), *Mothers, Sisters, Resisters: Oral Histories of Women Who Survived the Holocaust* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1998); Judith Tydor Baumel, *Double Jeopardy: Gender and the Holocaust* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1998); Esther Hertzog, *Life, Death and Sacrifice: Women and Family in the Holocaust* (Jerusalem: Gefen, 2008) and “Subjugated Motherhood and the Holocaust,” *Dapim: Studies on the Holocaust*, vol. 30, no. 1 (2016): pp. 16–34; Sonja Maria Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Sidel (eds.), *Sexual Violence against Jewish Women during the Holocaust* (Lebanon, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2010); Ofer and Weitzman; Joan Ringelheim “The Unethical and the Unspeakable: Women and the Holocaust,” in Neil Levi and Michael Rothberg (eds.), *The Holocaust: Theoretical Readings* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp. 169–77; Waxman.

their authors' gender, as well as to the sex segregation in Nazi concentration camps, these works offer a predominantly male perspective. Although there are, naturally, testimonies and fictionalised accounts penned by women, with the exception of the narratives by Olga Langyel, Anna Langfus or Cynthia Ozick, not many female-authored texts have so far achieved a notoriety equal to that enjoyed by Levi's *The Drowned and the Saved* or Kosinski's *The Painted Bird*.¹² This marginalisation of women's perspective in Holocaust literature must be what inspired Emily Prager's novel *Eve's Tattoo* (1991), which dramatises its eponymous protagonist's endeavours to re-inscribe women's life under Nazism into the historical record. Some critics, however, have found problematic Prager's shift of emphasis from racism to misogyny, since only two out of the women conjured up by Eve are actually Jewish.¹³

Male-authored and male-cantered, Art Spiegelman's graphic memoir *Maus* (1980–1991) and Philippe Claudel's novel *Brodeck* (2007) appear to promulgate the liminalisation of women's Holocaust experience in literature. In an attempt to destabilise this impression, I will argue that the two narratives self-consciously foreground and critique the absence of female voices from Holocaust writing which they appear to reinforce and thus reflect Linda Hutcheon's conception of postmodern art as programmatically self-contradictory.¹⁴ I will contend that, through their typically postmodern double-voicedness, *Maus* and *Brodeck* become attentive to the neglected female victims' ordeal, and to women's increased and sexuality-related vulnerability. More specifically, the two texts pay particular attention to women's biological roles as child-bearers and culturally-constructed roles as main child-carers.¹⁴

I begin with the survey of the criticism of Spiegelman's representation of his mother and use this criticism as a springboard for my original examination of Claudel's more recent novel. I will demonstrate that, while prioritizing the

¹² For a survey of female-authored Holocaust literature, see Lillian S. Kremer, *Women's Holocaust Writings* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999). Among other women authors not mentioned by Kremer are Chava Rosenfarb, Valentine Goby, Soazig Aaron, or Colombe Schneck.

¹³ James Berger, *After the End: Representations of the Apocalypse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 81.

¹⁴ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

¹⁴ Waxman points out that arriving in a concentration camp accompanied by children or visibly pregnant usually meant instant death, while in some ghettos pregnancy was punishable with deportation. Waxman, pp. 335–36.

male perspective and thus seemingly embracing the paradigm of the silenced female survivor, *Maus* and *Brodeck* engage in the characteristically postmodern questioning of this paradigm. To ‘use and abuse,’ or to install and challenge, to put it in Hutcheon’s terms,¹⁵ the stereotype of female passivity, submission and silence entrenched in Europe’s cultural tradition, the two narratives parodically engage with classic texts of this tradition, such as ancient Greek myths, fables, or visual art. While teasing out the two texts’ similarities and differences, dictated respectively by their postmodern aura and autobiographical and fictional contingencies¹⁶ the final part of my analysis will centre on *Maus*’s and *Brodeck*’s dialogue with the visual and literary representations of the lace maker and with the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. The two works’ intense intertextuality points, I will posit, to their authors’ sensitivity to the rootedness of the Jewish woman’s ordeal in the patriarchal social order, reaffirmed by cultural discourses such as those taken to task by *Maus* and *Brodeck*.

Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*

Unsurprisingly, the majority of the interpreters of Spiegelman’s highly successful and much commented upon graphic memoir have concentrated on the author’s controversial representation of Jews as mice, Germans as cats, Gentile Poles as pigs, and so forth. For some, Spiegelman’s allegorisation of the Holocaust potentially normalises the Nazi violence as a naturally predatory relationship between animal species. Others postulate that the author has successfully provoked a reflection on ‘the means and modes of representation

¹⁵ Hutcheon, *A Poetics*, p. 20.

¹⁶ The question of *Maus*’s generic status is a complex one. Spiegelman himself opposed the classification of his comic book as fiction when he asked for it to be moved from the fiction to non-fiction bestsellers list in *Sunday New York Times* Book Review. See Michael Kimmelman, “Examining How *Maus* Evolved,” *The New York Times*, 27 December 1991, online, <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/12/27/arts/review-art-examining-how-maus-evolved.html>. Disregarding authorial intention, critics have often categorised *Maus* as “graphic novel” rather than “graphic memoir.” Others, such as Alan Berger, have manifested their sensitivity of the novel’s ambiguous generic status: “[*Maus*] is simultaneously an autobiography, a biography, a comic book for adults, a documentary, a novel, and psychological history.” Alan L. Berger, “Bearing Witness: Theological Implications of Second-Generation Literature in America,” in Efraim Sicher (ed.), *Breaking Crystal: Writing and Memory After Auschwitz* (Urbana, Ill: University of Illinois Press, 1998) pp. 252–75 (p. 260).

in all scholarly and lay approaches to the Holocaust.¹⁷ Alongside those debating the ethical implications of Spiegelman's daring narrative approach to the morally sensitive topic of the Jewish tragedy, there are scholars interested in the silencing of the female survivor thematised by *Maus*.¹⁸ For example, Spiegelman's comic strip serves Horowitz as illustration that if at all portrayed in Holocaust literature, women are depicted as 'peripheral, helpless, and fragile; as morally deficient; or as erotic in their victimisation.'¹⁹ Zooming in on the specific case of *Maus*, Horowitz addresses the absence of the mother's voice from a text that sets out to tell the story of both the author's Polish-Jewish parents.²⁰ To summarise the couple's trajectory, Anja Zylberberg and Vladek Spiegelman first met in 1935 in the town of Sosnowiec and married two years later. Having passed through the ghetto and spent some time in hiding, they were eventually deported to Auschwitz, which they both survived. The loss of nearly all their relatives, including their three year old son, Richieu, to Nazi violence nevertheless left the couple with deep psychological scars.²¹ After the war, the Spiegelmans immigrated to Sweden, where they had another son, Arthur, and then to the United States, where in 1968 Anja committed suicide.

¹⁷ Michael Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 2.

¹⁸ Among critics who have paid attention to this aspect of Spiegelman's memoir are Victoria A. Elmwood, "'Happy, Happy Ever After': The Transformation of Trauma between the Generations in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*: The Survivor's Tale," *Biography*, vol. 27, no. 4 (Autumn 2004): pp. 691–720; Alison Mandaville, "Tailing Violence: Comics Narrative, Gender and the Father Tale in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*," *Pacific Coast Philology*, vol. 44, no. 2 (2009): pp. 216–48; Michael Rothberg, "'We Were Talking Jewish': Art Spiegelman's *Maus* as 'Holocaust' Production," *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 35, no. 4 (Winter 1994): pp. 661–87; Nancy K. Miller, "Cartoons of the Self: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Murderer—Art Spiegelman's *Maus*," in Deborah R. Geis (ed.), *Considering Maus: Approaches to Art Spiegelman's "Survivor's Tale" of the Holocaust* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2007), pp. 44–59; Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Family and Postmemory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), pp. 33–5.

¹⁹ Sara Horowitz, "Women in Holocaust Literature: Engendering Trauma Memory," in Ofer and Weitzman, pp. 364–78 (p. 367).

²⁰ Since Spiegelman himself insists on the non-fictional character of this text, unlike some scholars, I will be equating the author with the character called Artie/Art/Arthur.

²¹ Art Spiegelman, *The Complete Maus* (London: Penguin, 2003), pp. 276–77.

Written after this tragic event, *Maus* is based on Spiegelman's interviews with his father, whose story is metafictionally framed by the account of the production of the memoir and by the story of the author's own trauma as a second-generation survivor. Anja's perspective cannot be directly represented since the diaries that Spiegelman was hoping to draw on in his mother's absence prove unavailable. While the journals Anja kept in Poland were lost in the war, Vladek himself destroyed the memoirs that his wife had created after her liberation and that she expected her son to read when he was older.

In the face of this triple loss, Anja's tale is, as Horowitz puts it, 'recoverable only through the reconstruction of Vladek's and Art's memories.'²³ However faithful Vladek may be to his wife's past, 'his narrative of its events cannot possibly recount Anja's inner life. Nor can he speak with certainty of her experiences while they were parted.'²² In fact, Vladek does not even allow the thought that his wife's ordeal in the women's camp of Birkenau could have differed in any way from his experience of Auschwitz; he assures his son that '[Anja] went through the same what me: terrible!'²³ Only when pressed, does Vladek recall his efforts to contact and help his wife,²⁴ but, as Horowitz rightly notes, this is mainly to stress his own ingenuity and endurance, which Vladek offsets with Anja's physical and psychological frailty.²⁵ All this corroborates the critic's point that Vladek 'repeatedly casts himself and his wife in exaggerated gender roles—the brave and resourceful man, and the fearful and dependent woman.'²⁶ Interestingly though, paratextual material largely confirms Vladek's perspective. Both Renia Ostry and Marysia Winogron, who knew Art Spiegelman's mother in Birkenau, mention Vladek's resourcefulness and protectiveness towards his wife, as well as Anja's own physical and psychological fragility.²⁷ Returning to *Maus* itself, Spiegelman's father confines his wife to the feminine stereotype also by listing '[h]ouseworks' and 'knitting' as her main occupations in the ghetto, and, only as an afterthought, does he mention reading and writing in the diary.²⁸ Vladek's tendency to reduce Anja to the paradigm of domesticity or, in Alison Mandaville's words, to 'a

²² *Ibid.*, p. 368.

²³ Spiegelman, *The Complete Maus*, p. 160.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 211–16.

²⁵ Horowitz, "Women in Holocaust Literature," p. 367

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 368.

²⁷ Art Spiegelman, *Metamaus: A Look Inside a Modern Classic, Maus* (New York: Pantheon, 2011), pp. 279–88.

²⁸ Spiegelman, *The Complete Maus*, p. 86.

cartoon wife,²⁹ is paralleled by his idealisation of her and their marriage. For instance, he stresses their uninterrupted togetherness prior to their deportation, or recalls that Manczia, a Hungarian prisoner of Birkenau, was so moved by their mutual devotion that she risked her life to smuggle food and messages between husband and wife: ‘If a couple is loving each other so much, I must help however I can.’³⁰ Finally, even though this irks Vladek’s second wife, Mala, and visibly jeopardises their marriage, Spiegelman’s father continues to display Anja’s photos around the house and confesses that ‘[e]verywhere I look I am seeing Anja [...] from my good eye, from my glass eye, if they’re open or they’re closed, always I’m thinking of Anja.’³¹

Such a portrait of Anja finds, however, little support in the facts: from Vladek’s recollection of his conversation with his wife’s teacher we learn that Anja was intellectually curious and studious, and, as her husband himself admits by referencing her letters and diaries, a passionate and eloquent writer.³² While her excellent command of the Polish language reflects her middle-class status and assimilation,³³ her support for communist activists in a right-leaning Poland testifies to her courage and capacity for independent and progressive thinking.³⁴ All this reveals Vladek’s narratorial unreliability, which is further

²⁹ Mandaville, p. 233.

³⁰ Spiegelman, *The Complete Maus*, p. 213.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 20.

³³ Celia Stopnicka Heller, *On the Edge of Destruction: Jews of Poland Between the Two World Wars* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1977), pp. 143–44; Katarzyna Person, *Assimilated Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto 1940–1943* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2014), pp. 10–12. Person notes that for the Jewish intelligentsia that reached adulthood in the interwar period, Polish would have been the principal language. She lists a number of writers of Jewish origins, including Julian Tuwim, Bolesław Leśmian and Antoni Słonimski, who all expressed themselves in Polish and who rarely, if ever, touched on Jewish themes in their work.

³⁴ Spiegelman, *The Complete Maus*, p. 30. To exonerate at least partially Vladek’s paternalistic attitude towards Anja and his constant emphasis on his heroism as husband, Horowitz invokes his sense of guilt proceeding from his inability to protect his child (Horowitz, “Women in Holocaust Literature,” p. 368). However, her argument does not stand up to scrutiny in the light of Vladek’s repeated efforts to follow his friend, Ilzecki, and put Richieu up with a Polish family. Rather than Vladek’s failure as a father, this episode highlights Anja’s overprotectiveness, which

corroborated by the closing line of his testimony: ‘We were both very happy, and lived happy, happy ever after.’³⁵ In the light of our knowledge about Anja’s depression and ensuing suicide, and Vladek’s disagreeable personality evident in his tense relationship with Mala or his son,³⁶ the memoir’s final sentence bares Vladek’s untrustworthiness as the mediator of his wife’s story. As for the additional layer of mediation created by Spiegelman’s drawings and metatextual comments, it constantly reminds us of the editing involved in the narrativisation, not to say fictionalisation, of the past. This was required to impose coherence and chronological order on Vladek’s unstructured, not to say chaotic reminiscences.³⁷

Discussing the double embedding of Anja’s story in the father’s and then the son’s narrative, Michael Levine analogises Vladek’s mastery of his first wife’s image through his incineration of her notebooks, to the Nazis’ destruction of the Jews.³⁸ The critic’s position can be nuanced by comparing Vladek’s gesture not only to the burning of Jewish bodies in Auschwitz, but also to the Nazis’ efforts to destroy the evidence thereof. The Greek term ‘holocaustos,’ which means ‘burnt whole,’ indeed encapsulates both the crime and the erasure of its proof.³⁹ Such a reading is also invited by the novel’s self-awareness of its own double violence to Anja’s story, evident when, on learning that his mother’s voice has been irrevocably silenced, Spiegelman calls his father a ‘murderer.’⁴⁰ The author’s self-portrait in the second volume of *Maus* is equally revealing: brooding over the success of his book’s first volume, which, as indicated by the naked corpses bound for the crematorium piled at his feet, rests on Jewish deaths, Spiegelman draws himself with a lit cigarette.⁴¹ While for Levine this image unambiguously refers to the incineration of Anja’s notebooks,⁴² these

is also apparent in her overbearing attitude towards Artie, and explains her post-war depression and ensuing suicide. Spiegelman, *The Complete Maus*, p. 83.

³⁵ Spiegelman, *The Complete Maus*, p. 256.

³⁶ Before finally leaving Vladek, Mala states that Anja must have been a saint. *Ibid.*, p. 134.

³⁷ On several occasions, Artie asks his father to stay focused on his story. Also, Vladek requests that certain episodes should not find their way into the book.

³⁸ Michael G. Levine, “Necessary Stains: Spiegelman’s *Maus* and the Bleeding of History,” *American Image*, vol. 50, no. 3 (2002): pp. 317–41 (p. 326).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 325.

⁴⁰ Spiegelman, *The Complete Maus*, p. 161.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

⁴² Levine, “Necessary Stains,” p. 326.

details disturbingly narrow the gap between the father's (and perhaps also the son's) control over Anja's story and the wartime oppression of Jews, and expressly point to the gendered character of Nazi violence. More broadly, the elimination of Anja's perspective by Vladek, who—by the way—is shown to be racist himself,⁴³ establishes a connection 'between authoritarian regimes and the control of women,' postulated by Joan Wallach Scott.⁴⁴

Yet, we must not assume that this double framing of Anja's voice automatically turns *Maus* into a text perpetuating the silence of female Holocaust victims. As a prime example of postmodern literature that Hutcheon sees as programmatically marked by an intense interest in the past, self-reflexivity and a tendency to unsettle the very narrative conventions it inscribes,⁴⁵ Spiegelman's comic strip is manifestly self-conscious of the concepts and structures it works with, only to challenge them. This means that, even if *Maus* may be sidelining Anja's perspective, it does so, firstly, to respect its autobiographical contingencies, and, secondly, to foreground the liminality of the female survivor's perspective. In other words, Spiegelman's narrative cannot escape the strictures of certain dominants. In Hutcheon's terms, it questions and problematises what Roland Barthes called the 'given' or 'what goes without saying' in our culture.⁴⁶ Additionally, *Maus* must be credited for shining light on the still underrepresented aspect of the Holocaust, which is Jewish motherhood, and, more specifically, to borrow Langer's expression, on the 'choiceless choices,' that women had to make about their offspring.⁴⁷ Anja's postwar existence is indeed stamped by the trauma caused by the loss of her first child. From the cult surrounding Richieu's memory in Spiegelman's home we can infer that the disbelief in the boy's death eventually turned into a never-to-be accomplished mourning. We can further speculate that the process of mourning was thwarted by the guilt Anja experienced after she had refused to place her son with a non-Jewish Polish family. Instead, she entrusted Richieu to her sister, Tosha, who, on the liquidation of the Zawiercie ghetto, poisoned

⁴³ Spiegelman, *The Complete Maus*, p. 259. Defying his own experience of racial violence, Vladek proves to be anti-Black. He is opposed to his son's giving a lift to a hitchhiker whom he calls using the derogatory Yiddish term "shvartser."

⁴⁴ Joan Wallach Scott, *Feminism and History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 172.

⁴⁵ Hutcheon, *A Poetics*, p. 5.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. XIII.

⁴⁷ Lawrence Langer, "The Dilemma of Choice in the Deathcamps," *Centerpoint*, vol. 4 (Autumn): pp. 222–31 (p. 226).

herself, her own children, and Anja's son. In the terms of Julia Kristeva, who has developed Freud's theory of melancholia as rooted in the subject's culpability attached to the loss of the beloved (and simultaneously hated) object,⁴⁸ Anja's depression and resulting self-inflicted death can be seen as aftershocks of her wartime loss. *Maus* thus exposes the impact of Nazi violence beyond the narrow timeframe of the war itself, and thereby questions the widely accepted view of the liberation of the concentration camps as a happy ending to a terrible tragedy.⁴⁹ This view is further unsettled by paratextual material. During the last days of their incarceration and after their escape from captivity, both Winogron and Ostry remember fearing the threat of sexual violence from the Soviet soldiers who were reputed not only to rape Jewish women released from the camps but also to murder their victims.⁵⁰

Philippe Claudel's *Brodeck*

The earlier discussion concerning the absence of Anja's voice from *Maus* will now structure and illuminate my examination of a more recent Holocaust narrative. While also favoring the male perspective, Philippe Claudel's novel succeeds in both addressing the specifically female experience of the Nazi genocide and calling attention to women survivors' postwar trauma and silence. First published in French in 2007,⁵¹ *Brodeck* is the ninth novel of a successful and prolific French writer and filmmaker who, without being a descendant of survivors or even Jewish, believes that all postwar literature must in some way address the Holocaust.⁵² While dealing with the Nazi genocide, *Brodeck* does so in an unconventional and potentially contentious way; it parodies the narrative structures and tropes of the fairy tale and beast fable, that is of genres that, firstly, operate in a universalizing and ahistorical space, and, secondly, are associated with children's literature. Yet, in contrast to *Maus*, which—albeit in a very different way—also draws on the animal

⁴⁸ Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

⁴⁹ For an examination and critique of the conception of the liberation of the concentration camps as a happy event that put an end to the deportees' ordeal, see Dan Stone, *The Liberation of the Camps: The Holocaust and Its Aftermath* (London: Yale University Press, 2015).

⁵⁰ Spiegelman, *Metamaus*, p. 280, p. 282, p. 283.

⁵¹ Philippe Claudel, *Le Rapport de Brodeck* (Paris: Stock, 2007).

⁵² Emily Greenhouse, "Interview: Philippe Claudel," trans. Emily Greenhouse, *Granta*, vol. 111 (30 June 2010), <https://granta.com/interview-philippe-claudel/>.

fable,⁵³ *Brodeck* has been praised for its strategy of ‘transparency, detachment and silence’ that prevents a ‘trivialis[ation of] the Holocaust’ and ‘ensure[s] that a respectful objectivity is maintained.’⁵⁴ This and other sympathetic reviews have been accompanied by the award of several prestigious literary prizes, including the Prix Goncourt des Lycéens.⁵⁵ Claudel’s novel has also been translated into some thirty languages, adapted as a well-received *bande dessinée*,⁵⁶ and adopted as set text in French schools.

Even though *Brodeck* has come under substantial academic scrutiny, critics have not yet commented on its portrayal of women. Instead, they have mainly focused on the eponymous character’s wartime sufferings in an Auschwitz-like concentration camp and on their continuation through postwar intolerance of otherness. This intolerance is embodied in the murder of a benevolent stranger, nicknamed De Anderer, who recently settled in *Brodeck*’s remote village.⁵⁷ Set

⁵³ Dominick LaCapra has called Spiegelman’s idea to bring Auschwitz to the comics as potentially “risky, even foolhardy” and “shockingly inappropriate.” Dominick LaCapra, “Twas the Night before Christmas: Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*,” in *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), pp. 139–79 (pp. 139–40). Michael Rothberg, called *Maus* “potentially obscene.” Michael Rothberg, ““We Were Talking Jewish,”” p. 141.

⁵⁴ France Grenaudier-Klijn, “Landscapes Do Not Lie: War, Abjection and Memory in Philippe Claudel’s *Le Rapport de Brodeck*,” *Essays in French Literature and Culture*, vol. 47 (Nov. 2010): pp. 87–107 (pp. 94–5).

⁵⁵ *Brodeck* has also won the Prix des Libraires du Québec (2008), the Prix des Lecteurs-Le Livre de Poche (2009) and the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize in the United Kingdom (2010).

⁵⁶ Manu Larcenet, *Le Rapport de Brodeck*. 2 vols (Paris: Dargaud, 2015–2016).

⁵⁷ Here are some of the articles dedicated to Claudel’s novel: Dominique Bonnet, “Étrangeté et étranger dans l’univers de Philippe Claudel,” *Carnets: Revue électronique d’études française de l’APEF*, vol. 1 (May 2014): pp. 45–57; Dominique Bonnet, “*Le Rapport de Brodeck*: Sur les traces du récit lacunaire à la manière de Jean Giono,” *Çedille*, vol. 8 (April 2012): pp. 65–75; Kateřina Drsková, ““Composer son rien avec un morceau de tout:” À propos des romans *Les Âmes grises* et *Le Rapport de Brodeck* de Philippe Claudel,” *Études Romanes de Brno*, vol. 31, no. 1 (2012): pp. 189–96; Aurélie Barjonet, “La Troisième Génération devant la Seconde Guerre mondiale: Une situation inédite,” *Études romanes de Brno*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2012): pp. 39–55; Ivonne Hsieh, “L’Emprise du passé: Crime, châtement et culpabilité dans la création de Philippe Claudel,” *Voix plurielles*, vol. 7, no. 2 (November 2010): pp. 2–15; Helena Duffy, “Philippe Claudel’s *Brodeck* as a Parody of the Fable or the Holocaust Universalised,” *Holocaust Studies*, vol. 24, no. 4 (2018): pp. 503–26.

in an unspecified mountainous and sylvan corner of Central Europe, where a Germanic dialect is spoken,⁵⁸ Claudel's novel opens two years after Brodeck's return from deportation. As the best educated member of the community who, in addition, possesses a typewriter, the protagonist is coerced by his neighbours to report on their killing of the Anderer to the authorities and, in so doing, to exonerate them. As the protagonist examines his own memories of the newcomer and questions those who came into contact with him, we gradually learn that it was the *Anderer's* flamboyant dress, politeness, erudition, and kindness towards animals that stirred up the villagers' murderous rage. This is because the stranger's difference reminded them of their wartime wrongdoings in relation to those stamped by alterity. As he is reconstituting the chronology of events leading up to the crime and probing its roots, Brodeck reminisces about his own traumatic childhood in war-torn Europe. He also remembers his studies in the neighbouring country's capital, where he met his future wife, Emélia, and where he lived through *Pürische Nacht*, which stands in for the 1938 attacks on synagogues and Jewish businesses, known as Kristallnacht. In Claudel's novel, the racial violence to which Brodeck himself nearly falls victim, is directed towards those called *Fremdër*, a word whose dual significance renders the terms 'scumbags' and 'foreigners' synonymous.⁵⁹ When the war breaks out, Brodeck's village is brutally invaded by the neighbouring country's troops, who, led by Captain Adolf Buller, march under red-and-black flags. Denounced by his neighbours alongside the other *Fremdër* of the village, Simon Fripman, Brodeck is deported to a concentration camp where he suffers horrific mental and physical torture. What helps him survive—even if his survival requires him to renounce his human dignity and literally become his oppressors' canine servant—is the urge to be reunited with his beloved wife, Emélia.

By establishing Emélia as instrumental in Brodeck's survival, Claudel grants her a considerable diegetic importance. Yet, paradoxically, her presence in the novel is scant, her voice is almost entirely absent, and her character is one-dimensional. Indeed, Brodeck's wife is reduced to beautiful hazel eyes and brown hair, delicate scent of moss and sunshine, and docility. In keeping with the novel's playful engagement with the genre of fairy tale, Emélia's innocence, passivity and kind-heartedness align her with the archetype of

⁵⁸ Grenaudier-Klijn has identified the region as Alsace. Grenaudier-Klijn, "Landscapes Do Not Lie," p. 192.

⁵⁹ Philippe Claudel, *Brodeck*, trans. John Cullen (New York: Anchor Books, 2010), p. 228.

persecuted beauty in the style of Cinderella, Snow White or Rapunzel. And, although unlike these fairy-tale characters she does not marry an actual prince, she considers Brodeck as such; she conflates him with the Prinz of the song that provides a musical backdrop for the couple's first kiss and that, after the violence Emélia suffers during the war, she compulsively hums.⁶⁰

Interestingly, Brodeck's wife is only one of the novel's female characters styled on feminine archetypes found in fables and fairy tales, even if Claudel often playfully subverts these archetypes. For example, Fédorine, who fosters Brodeck during an earlier war, and Mother Pitz, who runs a café patronised mainly by women, are imagined as fairy god motherly figures. Conversely, the camp commandant's sadistic and voyeuristic wife, Zeilenesseniss,⁶¹ who tenderly nurses her baby while watching the daily selection and execution, is styled on Snow White's beautiful but evil stepmother. Whether these women epitomise good or evil in Claudel's crudely polarised characterisation, it is safe to say that *Brodeck* shares with Spiegelman's 'patrilineal text' the tendency to banish women's voices.⁶² Marianne Hirsch aptly notes that Mala's own survival of the Holocaust does not interest Art very much,⁶³ while Françoise, the author-protagonist's French wife, 'is at best a sounding board, an enabling presence, for the confused cartoonist.'⁶⁴ Likewise, seen rather than heard, in Claudel's novel women are not even deemed to deserve to be informed about the *Anderer's* murder. What separates the two narratives, however, is Brodeck's acute awareness of the discriminatory attitude of the village men, including himself: '[w]hen I got home I said nothing to my women [...]. The others, all those others, had they not done the same with their wives, their sisters?'⁶⁶ It could even be argued that by echoing Brodeck's and Moshe Kelmar's theft of water from a young mother and child during deportation, the protagonist's reluctant collusion with the *Anderer's* killers articulates Claudel's sensitivity to women's vulnerability during the Holocaust and to the role patriarchy and misogyny played in women's experience of persecution.

As if to convey this point, Claudel figures Emélia as fragile and thoroughly dependent on her husband in the face of the violence that she and Brodeck face

⁶⁰ Claudel, *Brodeck*, p. 166. *Shöner Prinz so lieb/Zu weit fortgegangen* [Handsome prince, so dear/Gone too far away].

⁶¹ The character's nickname translates as 'eater of the souls.'

⁶² Elmwood, p. 712.

⁶³ Spiegelman, *The Complete Maus*, pp. 94–5.

⁶⁴ Hirsch, *Family Frames*, p. 35.

as *Fremdër*. That said, as in *Maus*, where the congenital character of Anja's mental frailty is signalled by the postpartum depression she suffers in the late 1930s, Brodeck's wife is shown to be inherently helpless. Already on the couple's first encounter in the capital, which takes place shortly before the war, Emélia is depicted as too lightly dressed for the weather and hence shivering like 'a small bird—a fragile, lively willow tit.'⁶⁵ With xenophobia on the rise, her position becomes increasingly precarious, especially due to her pronounced foreign accent, which, stereotypically, Brodeck finds attractive. This is because, in his eyes, the awkwardness characterizing the young woman's language makes her resemble a child that 'stumbles on a stone, nearly falls, regains its balance and bursts out laughing.'⁶⁶ And yet the novel provides only one sample of Emélia's speech, which is the naïve question she asks Brodeck: 'So you're a student, you say?'⁶⁷ As their relationship develops, Emélia continues to be shown as passive and compliant. For instance, she obeys Brodeck's request to stay indoors during *Pürische Nacht* and then renounces her job as an embroiderer in order to follow him to his village as his wife. Significantly, in the scene in which Brodeck proposes to Emélia, the young woman is working on a large tablecloth scattered with lilies and stars, which makes the protagonist's body 'go numb.'⁶⁸ While it is possible to read both the lily and the star as symbols of Israel,⁶⁹ their juxtaposition is more likely intended to establish a stark contrast between Emélia's purity, connoted by the delicate flower, and the racial violence anticipated by the stars. Indeed, the latter unmistakably evoke the emblems Jews were obliged to wear in Nazi-occupied Europe in preparation for their confinement to ghettos and, ultimately, extermination. Consistently with her earlier silence, Emélia communicates her consent and her accompanying emotion non-verbally: 'I felt her shivering in my arms, and it was as though I held a trembling bird in my arms. [...] She turned her beautiful face to me, smiled, and gave me a long kiss.'⁷⁰

Apart from her inherent weakness, Emélia shares Anja Spiegelman's mental instability brought on (or exacerbated) by her wartime ordeal. Trying to protect

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

⁶⁹ Yitzhak Zahavy, *Archeology, Stamps and Coins of the State of Israel* (2009), p. 157.

⁷⁰ Claudel, *Brodeck*, p. 193. Emphasis added.

the three *Fremdër* girls, whom the villagers find on the run and then, with the blessing and assistance of the occupying soldiers, rape and murder, Emélia is sexually violated and beaten herself.⁷³ The experience leaves her not only pregnant but also prisoner to aphasia and mental torpor, evident not only in her unresponsiveness to sensory stimuli but also in her obsessive humming of the already-mentioned song. Crucially, it is in this state of mental absence that the protagonist finds his wife most beautiful. As if she were a small child, Brodeck washes, dresses and undresses her. During a family outing in the forest, he refers to Emélia and her young daughter, Poupchette, as ‘my girls,’⁷¹ treating the mother and child with the same solicitude. This episode, in which Emélia is described as ‘holding her arms away from her body, a little as though she were preparing to take flight,’⁷² unites the images of child and bird that throughout the novel serve to underscore the helplessness of Brodeck’s wife. Their conflation turns Emélia into an icon of defenceless femininity, also embodied through the two other women making up the protagonist’s family: his adopted daughter, Poupchette, and his foster mother, Fédorine, who herself is likened to a fragile bird certain to perish at the onset of winter.⁷⁶ As if the three women were one and the same person or perhaps, as Sébastien Hogue speculates, a product of Brodeck’s troubled mind,⁷³ the novel closes with the image of the protagonist carrying them in his arms towards a better world.

The Jewish mother as lacemaker and Eurydice

Claudé further underscores Emélia’s vulnerability and submissiveness by casting her as an embroiderer, a profession that, in Nicola Haxell’s view, signifies—along with other forms of needlecraft—‘womanly fragility, delicacy and decorative non-productivity’ and ‘summarises a patriarchal idealisation of the feminine.’⁷⁴ Emélia’s connection to needlecraft is even more direct than that of Anja Spiegelman, who is a daughter of a textile manufacturer and is associated in Vladek’s memories with mundane domestic and traditionally feminine tasks, including knitting. In fact, Claudé overtly inscribes Emélia

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 165.

⁷³ Sébastien Hogue, “Oublier ou se souvenir? Culpabilité et mémoire dans *Le Rapport de Brodeck* de Philippe Claudé,” *Masters diss.*, Université de Laval, 2015, pp. 92–3.

⁷⁴ Nichola Anne Haxell, “Woman as Lacemaker: The Development of a Literary Stereotype in Texts by Charlotte Brontë, Nerval, Lainé, and Chawaf,” *The Modern Language Review*, vol. 89, no. 3 (July 1994): pp. 545–60 (p. 546).

into what Haxell calls ‘the paradigm of the lacemaker,’⁷⁵ when, for example, he shows her positioned by the window, immersed in her craft. The scene unmistakably brings to mind Johannes Vermeer’s painting *The Lacemaker* (1669–1670), as well as other icons of silent domesticity by the same artist. Furthermore, Emélia closely follows the trajectory of the characters embodying the literary paradigm of the lacemaker that Haxell identified in Pascal Lainé’s *La Dentelière* (1974), Charlotte Brontë’s *The Professor* (1846), Gérard de Nerval’s ‘Sylvie’ (1852–53) or Chantal Chawaf’s *Retable, la rêverie* (1978). The lacemaker in these texts is of humble background or reduced circumstances, as well as an outsider who ‘attempts to make her way in the world through patient and unassuming craft.’⁷⁶ She then enters a relationship with a man who is socially and educationally superior to her, and who, ‘attracted initially to her docility and “naturalness,”’ takes her under his wing and, ultimately, transforms her into a work of fiction. While all this also applies to Emélia, like the paradigmatic lacemaker, Brodeck’s wife renounces her craft and, having lost an authentic means of expression, is featured at the end of her story as marked by silence.⁷⁷ However, Claudel’s adherence to the literary model isolated by Haxell is evidently self-conscious and parodic, and must therefore be distinguished from Vladek’s reductive portrait of his wife, if not from Spiegelman’s reframing of this portrait in his graphic memoir. In other words, rather than aligning Emélia with the idealisation of obedient and reticent femininity, Claudel, in typically postmodern fashion, distances himself from it and, by extension, exposes this idealisation as consistent with what Ronit Lentin calls ‘the conspiracy of silence that enveloped displaced women Shoah survivors.’⁷⁸

If illuminated by Roland Barthes’s well-known metaphorisation of text as fabric,⁷⁹ and by its feminist critique, to which I will return,⁸⁰ Claudel’s choice

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 547.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 547.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 547.

⁷⁸ Lentin, “Expected to Live,” p. 691.

⁷⁹ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1975).

⁸⁰ Nancy K. Miller, “Archnologies: The Woman, the Text and the Critic,” in Nancy K. Miller (ed.), *The Poetics of Gender* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 270–95; Nancy Schor, *Breaking the Chain: Women, Theory and French Realist Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); Susan Gilbert and

to cast Emélie as an embroiderer establishes reciprocity between her and her writer husband. The author's intention is confirmed by his choice to call his protagonist 'Brodeck,' whereby he creates a phonological kinship between Emélie's profession (in French 'brodeuse') and her husband's name. The analogy between writing and weaving is further strengthened by Brodeck's use of the colloquial French expression 'broder un roman,'⁸¹ that means to embellish a story at the expense of exactitude or truth,⁸² and that playfully points to the non-realist/fabulous narrative style of Claudel's novel. The author's recourse to the lacemaker paradigm therefore indicates the couple's shared authorship of Brodeck's testimony. In a way, this inverts the creative dynamics within *Maus* where Anja is the writer, but it is Vladek who gets to shape and articulate her story, before the narrative achieves its ultimate form as the son's comic strip. Picking up on this point, Mandaville exploits the pun made by the cover of the first volume of *Maus*, 'The Survivor's Tale,' that features Vladek as a mouse endowed with a long tail and putting his arm protectively around his much smaller and visibly frightened wife. In the text itself, the tail loses its earlier playful significance, instead signifying Jewishness or, more directly, a circumcised penis. In the scene where the couple pose as non-Jewish Poles by wearing pig masks, the long tail protruding from under Anja's clothes and trailing behind her marks an ethnic and religious identity. In Michael Rothberg's words, Anja's body 'leaks Jewishness,'⁸³ which she is unable to hide. In contrast, sporting a coat and boots a Gestapo officer would wear off duty, Vladek can easily pass for a German or at least for a Gentile Pole.⁸⁴ The differentiation between husband's and wife's bodies stresses the gendered vulnerability of Spiegelman's mother. It indirectly undermines the common perception of Jewish males as less able to conceal their identity than women, whose bodies are not visibly marked by religious practice. Spiegelman also implicitly goes against the position of Sander Gilman who, while acknowledging a need for studies dedicated to Jewish women's bodies, identifies the Western conception of the circumcised Jew as

Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979).

⁸¹ Claudel, *Brodeck*, p. 96.

⁸² Jean-Charles de Laveaux, *Nouveau Dictionnaire de la langue française* (1820), vol. 1, p. 268.

⁸³ Rothberg, "We Were Talking Jewish," p. 675.

⁸⁴ Spiegelman, *The Complete Maus*, p. 138.

what lies at the heart of Western antisemitism.⁸⁵ Thus, by giving Anja a long tail that makes a Gentile Polish woman scream ‘[t]here is a Jewess in the courtyard! Police!’⁸⁶ Spiegelman foregrounds the gendered character of Nazi violence or, in Doris Bergen’s terms, the fact that ‘the line dividing insiders and outsiders, life and death, in German-occupied Europe ran directly through the bodies of women.’⁸⁷ Pushing this even further, Vladek’s clothes in this scene could be read as a cipher for the subtle identification of the husband (and son) with the Nazi oppressors, an identification that, as mentioned earlier, is equally suggested by the trope of burning.

Spiegelman’s attention to his mother’s physical appearance and, more broadly, his choice of a medium that brings together text and body,⁸⁸ corroborates Naomi Mandel’s view that, in the context of the Holocaust, ‘the mutual reverence accorded historical fact on the one hand, and this fact’s subjective apprehension [...] on the other, produce an approach to testimony that is predicated on an identification of the body with the speech.’⁸⁹ As an example, Mandel distinguishes between an actual survivor whose ‘body’s experience lends crucial authority to her speech’ and the fabrication of Swiss writer, Binjamin Wilkomirski, who claimed (and perhaps believed) to have survived the Nazi genocide, but whose body was in fact not present at the scene.⁹⁰ With a medium that, in Mandel’s terms, ‘imbues the narrative with a degree of corporeality that prohibits the kind of dissociation of survivor from speech,’⁹¹ Spiegelman strives to reconstitute not only his mother’s missing account of the Holocaust but also, as Nancy Miller has it, her body.⁹² At least, in Levine’s view, Spiegelman endeavours to create a space where he can

⁸⁵ Sander Gilman, *The Jew’s Body* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 5.

⁸⁶ Spiegelman, *The Complete Maus*, p. 139.

⁸⁷ Quoted in Myrna Goldberg and Amy Shapiro (eds.), *Different Horrors, Same Hell: Gender and the Holocaust* (Washington: University of Washington Press, 2013), p. 11.

⁸⁸ Naomi Mandel, *Against the Unspeakable: Complicity, the Holocaust, and Slavery in America* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006), p. 118.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 104. Mandel refers to *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood* (1997) that recount the author’s childhood experience of KL Majdanek and Auschwitz. A year after the book’s publication, Wilkomirski was exposed as an impostor and his narrative as elaborate fiction rather than a memoir.

⁹¹ Spiegelman, *The Complete Maus*, p. 139.

⁹² Miller, “Cartoons of the Self,” p. 109.

contemplate the silence left by the destruction of Anja's body and the story she produced.⁹³

Claudel's novel evidently shares Spiegelman's refusal of the idea of a disembodied text structuring Barthes's metaphor, according to which 'lost in this tissue [...] the subject unmakes itself, like the spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of its web.'⁹⁴ Brodeck therefore endorses Miller's call for the attention not only to the weaver-writer's output, but also to the weaver-writer herself, and for the displacement of the Barthesian concept of 'hyphology' with 'arachnology.' The latter term designates 'a critical positioning that reads against indifferentiation to discover the embodiment in writing of a gendered subjectivity.'⁹⁵ But, in contrast to the mythological character of Arachne, who inspired Miller's revision of Barthes's theory and who produces a feminocentric narrative using her craft,⁹⁶ or to Philomela—another figure in Greek mythology—who, silenced by her rapist, discloses her attacker's identity in a tapestry,⁹⁷ Emélia loses not only her speech but also her senses and hence her craft.

In this context, Emélia's contribution to her husband's text can only be passive and purely corporeal, an idea expressed in Brodeck's choice to hide his clandestine report from his neighbours' ill-founded curiosity on his wife's body. When recovered from the pouch tied around Emélia's waist, the pages are impregnated with her scent and warmth, so much so that they keep Brodeck comfortable in an unheated shed where he writes. From this detail we can infer Claudel's subscription to the notion of the returning of the woman's body to writing, dear to thinkers associated with the practice of *écriture féminine*⁹⁸ and

⁹³ Levine, "Expected to Live," p. 324.

⁹⁴ Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, p. 64.

⁹⁵ Miller, "Arachnologies," p. 272.

⁹⁶ A simple weaver, Arachne engages in a contest with Athena. In contrast to the Goddess's "classically theocentric" tapestry that testifies to her "phallic identification with Olympian authority," Arachne retells stories of seduction and betrayal, featuring women such as Leda, Europa, Anthiope and Medusa. Enraged, Athena beats Arachne on the head with the shuttle, and, ultimately, after Arachne's suicide, turns her into a spider. Miller, "Arachnologies," p. 273.

⁹⁷ Coincidentally, Philomela is transformed into a nightingale, a detail that may have inspired Claudel's recourse to the trope of the bird in Emélia's story.

⁹⁸ See, for example, Cixous's call for women to make their bodies heard as she postulates "More body, hence more writing." Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the

succinctly captured by Elaine Showalter's claim that 'anatomy is textuality.'⁹⁹ Instead of writing—to use Luce Irigaray's imagery—in black ink dripping from a pen dipped into the murdered bodies of the woman and the mother,¹⁰⁰ Hélène Cixous proposes the notion of maternally-connoted white ink that creates feminine writing capable of illuminating the woman's body and bringing her out of the dark where she has been kept by patriarchy.¹⁰¹

Maternal overtones also resonate in Claudel's novel, where the positioning of Brodeck's testimony to the violence that both he and his wife have suffered around Emélia's waist, suggests motherhood should be re-conceptualised as a creative process. Such a reading is confirmed by Brodeck's explicit equation of his writing with gestation: 'I tell myself that Poupchette grew in Emélia's belly, and that in a way, the story I am writing comes out of it, too. I like this encouraging analogy.'¹⁰² As well as showing an affinity with the story of Anja, whose Holocaust experience will eventually get across thanks to her son, Claudel's revalorisation of motherhood alludes to Kristeva's view that motherhood can become 'a creation in the strongest sense of the word.'¹⁰³ While appreciating that today's women may wish to affirm themselves by aspiring 'toward artistic and, in particular, literary creation,'¹⁰⁴ Kristeva notes that, when writing, they do not have to choose between emulating or flatly rejecting masculine narrativity. This is because literature does not belong exclusively to the symbolic order, which, following Lacan, Kristeva attaches to the masculine, but is a heterogeneous construction from which femininity is not excluded. As illustrated for Kristeva by Flaubert's well-known—albeit undocumented—dictum 'Madame Bovary, c'est moi,' writing contains elements of both the masculine and the feminine. Or, as the critic puts it, it is simultaneously symbolic and semiotic, which Kristeva identifies with the pre-Oedipal and pre-verbal union with the maternal body. This means that women

Medusa," trans. Keith and Paula Cohen, *Signs*, vol. 1, no. 4 (Summer 1976): pp. 875–93 (p. 880 and p. 886).

⁹⁹ Elaine Showalter, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 8, no. 2 (1981): pp. 179–205 (p. 187).

¹⁰⁰ Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 126.

¹⁰¹ Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," p. 881.

¹⁰² Claudel, *Brodeck*, p. 251.

¹⁰³ Julia Kristeva, "Women's Time," trans. Harry Blake and Alice Jardine, *Signs*, vol. 7, no. 1 (Autumn 1981): pp. 13–35 (p. 31).

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

can proclaim ‘Flaubert, c’est moi,’¹⁰⁵ as in their writing the linear and logical modalities connected with the symbolic coincide with the disruptions in the text created by gaps, silences, puns and rhythms characteristic of women’s writing.¹⁰⁶

In Brodeck, the bisexuality of Holocaust testimony is additionally stressed through Claudel’s recurring mobilisation of the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, which I will now briefly contrast with Maus’s engagement with the same narrative. The myth’s deployment in a novel about the horrors of World War II is in itself unsurprising as, in the postwar period, the story of Orpheus’s quest for his beloved in the depths of Hades, often served to articulate wartime scenarios. More specifically, it helped to convey, as Julia Hell posits, the conflicting scopophilic desire towards the Holocaust and wartime devastation, and an equally powerful impulse to look away.¹⁰⁷ Although produced some forty years after the war, Maus continues to use the Orphic myth by depicting Anja’s survival of Auschwitz as dependent on her husband’s devotion to her. In a letter that she addressed to her husband during their incarceration and that Vladek quotes from memory, translating from Polish, Anja attributes her will to live to the thought of her husband: ‘Each day I think to run into the electric wires and finish everything. But to know that you are still alive it gives me still to hope ...’¹⁰⁸ Many years after the war, Vladek, to quote Hirsch, continues to ‘sing the Orphic song about the internal workings of Hades,’ yet, in the critic’s view, his reconstruction of Anja’s story only reinforces her exclusion from Maus. Drawing on Klaus Theweleit’s theory of Orphic creation as ‘a masculine process facilitated by the encounter with a beautiful dead woman who may not herself come out or sing her own song,’ Hirsch conceives of the father and son as a paradigmatic masculine couple ‘who can bypass the generativity of women’ and ‘whose bonding depends on the tragic absence of women.’¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ Fiona Tolan, “Feminism,” in Patricia Waugh (ed.), *Literary Theory and Criticism: An Oxford Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 319–39 (p. 335).

¹⁰⁷ Julia Hell, “Ruins Travel: Orphic Journeys through 1940s Germany,” in John Zilcosky (ed.), *Writing Travel: The Poetics and Politics of the Modern Journey* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2008), pp. 123–60; Julia Hell, “Modernity and the Holocaust, or Listening to Eurydice,” *Theory, Culture and Society*, vol. 27, no. 6 (2010): pp. 125–54.

¹⁰⁸ Spiegelman, *The Complete Maus*, p. 213.

¹⁰⁹ Hirsch, *Family Frames*, pp. 34–5.

Whereas Anja, as Hirsch notes, is reduced to the role of a medium or an intermediary,¹¹⁰ and, to put it in Rothberg's terms, Maus is a typical Eurydice/Orpheus story that 'exiles the feminine in order to create a masculine work founded on feminine absence,'¹¹¹ Claudel's retelling of the mythic poet's quest for his beloved insists on the mutuality of the rescue efforts and confirms Emélia's involvement in the authoring of Brodeck's tissue-text-song. As suggested earlier, Brodeck unequivocally ascribes his survival of *l'univers concentrationnaire* to his desire to be reunited with Emélia, and conceives of himself as someone who may as well be dead, but who, having eluded the gatekeepers of the Underworld, is returning to the realm of the living: 'I walked and walked and walked. I walked to Emélia. I was heading for her. I was going home. I never stopped repeating to myself that I was going home to her.'¹¹² Having come back to his wife, Brodeck finds Emélia locked in the Orphic song about a woman awaiting the return of her beloved, and so it is now, as he vows, his turn to descend to the place to which she has been doomed by her rapists and bring back her wondering soul.¹¹⁷

Conclusions

Spiegelman's implicit and Claudel's explicit recourse to the myth of Orpheus and Euridice, as well as their parodic drawing on other texts of European culture, confirms the two authors' adherence to postmodern interdiscursivity that uses echoes of past narratives only to subject them to ironic questioning. The dialogue in which Maus and Brodeck engage with works that have participated in the construction of female stereotypes could be regarded as their attempt to underscore the entrenchment of the feminine figure of silence and passivity in our cultural tradition. This entrenchment, as Claudel's and Spiegelman's narratives seem to stipulate, in turn facilitated not only the Nazis' misogynistic policies, including those directed at Jewish women, but also the postwar silencing of female survivors. Seen in this light, Spiegelman's provocative representation of Jews as mice and Germans as cats can be reviewed as criticism of stereotypes embedded in our culture, whether related to race or gender. Written some two decades after the publication of Maus, Claudel's retelling of the Nazi genocide as a fable challenges its many intertexts even more resolutely, as exemplified by its simultaneous inscription and subversion of the lacemaker paradigm or of the Orphic myth. In critiquing

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹¹¹ Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism*, p. 92.

¹¹² Claudel, *Brodeck*, p. 67.

cultural discourses for their stereotyping of women, Spiegelman's and Claudel's narratives highlight the still much-neglected facet of Jewish suffering under the Nazis: the sexual violence endured by women, the hard choices mothers had to make in relation to their offspring, and the protracted psychological repercussions of rape or loss of a child. At the same time, through the figure of the *Zeilenesseniss*, whose status as a young mother does not preclude her sadistic scopophilia, Claudel questions the traditional idealisation of motherhood. Moreover, in contrast to Spiegelman's patrifocal text, *Brodeck* enlists the canonical narratives promoting feminine stereotypes in an effort to reposit writing as a creative activity nourished by the feminine—and especially by the maternal—body. Its author strives to restore the voice of the silenced female survivor to Holocaust testimony, and to inscribe into this testimony the woman's sexuality-related experience. Consequently, despite being narrated from the male perspective and inevitably focusing on their male protagonists, *Maus* and even more so *Brodeck* successfully reframe the Holocaust as a gendered experience. They draw attention to both the specificity of this experience and the prolonged marginalisation of women's voices in Holocaust testimony, studies and fiction.

Notes on contributor

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