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Borges, Dante and the Golem: In search of the fallible God in Spiel

The various narrators in Spiel*, the novel I am near to completing for my PhD, either come to the realisation or make the revelation that they are fictions, and that they are projections of a meta-author. This paper traces various models I have used to inform this projection of meta-authorial intent.*

The author at the end of the book

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She waited. Finally I had it, and it dislodged itself from my mouth as if it were a seed I had coughed up. I had no control over it at all.

> *- My name, I said, and it sounded alien and guilty. My name is Karl. Karl Rein.*

*

In his essay "The Simurgh and the Eagle", Borges compares the celestial bodies that form themselves into the shape of an eagle's head in *Canto XVIII* of Dante's Paradise (Dante 100-108) to the tale, as told by the Persian Farid al-Din Atter, of the bird pilgrims as they search for the King of Birds, the Simurgh, who is made of thirty birds. At the end of their pilgrimage, the last surviving birds come to the place they have been searching for, only to discover that they have been reduced to just thirty in number and that after all it is they themselves who are the birds who will combine to make the Bird King. "The searchers," says Borges, "are what they seek." They are the "secret protagonist" of the story (Borges 297).

This story reminds me of *The Monster at the End of this Book* (Stone & Smollin), a Little Golden Book I treasured as a child but which I had forgotten about until I came across it in the checkout lane at Safeway in 2001. In it the character Grover (familiar to viewers of the children's television program *Sesame Street* as a loveable blue furry beast) addresses the reader directly, imploring him or her not to turn another page in the book because each page turned brings them both closer to the monster at the end of the book promised in the title. After Grover has gone to extraordinary, but futile, lengths to prevent the reader from progressing, including tying the pages together with rope, and building a brick wall across the page, the reader and Grover together discover

that the monster is none other than Grover himself, and that of course he has nothing to fear from himself. Apart from being a parable about censorship and fear of the Other, *The Monster at the End of This Book* is also a metafiction which concerns itself with a character whose journey is about resisting the discovery of himself. It posits a secret protagonist in the same way that Borges describes in al-Din's tale.

Much the same story is told in the film *Fight Club* (Fincher) where the character Tyler Durden is written/imagined into being through the consciousness of the narrator. As far as the narrator is concerned, Durden is a separate person to himself, he cannot articulate or perceive the reality that Durden is contiguous with himself, that he is the projected Other of himself.

At the conclusion of *Spiel*, the novel I have almost completed for my doctoral studies, the principal narrator finds that he is like Grover, like the Simurgh and like Tyler Durden/the narrator, in that the absent object of desire at the end of his search - which he has conducted as if it was for a woman named Rosa Stumm - is in fact an Othered aspect of himself. The reader discovers not only that the narrator is the novel's secret protagonist but that the narrator himself, in the guise of Karl Rein, is a textual fiction, a reading of himself.

What does this theme of self-fictionalisation have to say about the text and about its author? Why have I chosen it to shape the outcome of my novel? What does it reveal about my intentions?

In an essay on the significance of fictionalising, Wolfgang Iser writes that " [e]very literary text inevitably contains a selection from a variety of social, historical, cultural and literary systems that exist as referential fields outside the text". And that it is this "selection [which] results in revealing the intentionality of the author" (Iser). In this light I am suggesting that function of the author is akin to that of the reader. The reader desires to become one with the text, the reader gives unity and completion to the text and is the necessary but absent player in its formation. To know this contiguity between reader and writer is to understand something about how, or why, the writer writes. To know what the author intends is to be able to draw links between the world he or she lives in and the world made manifest in the text. The question it raises is about how this intentionality might be unlocked. Can it be unlocked from the text itself, or do we need a reference text, an author's encyclopaedia which will make it clear? To me one of the answers to this question highlights the value of the exegetical component of the creative doctorate, as understood by Nigel Krauth, as a type of preface, "a framing device positioned between the world created in the fiction (or play or poem) and the world the reader inhabits" (Krauth). Of course questions must be asked about how accurate such a preface might be. When we reflect on the case of Binjamin Wilkomirski, whose performance of his childhood autobiography as a survivor of the Shoah has been proven as a fake (Maechler), can we accept that the text that claims to truthfully tell the desires that have shaped a text - in particular one that signifies itself as being drawn from memory - holds any ultimate relationship to either fact or fiction? Am I, in this exploration of my own authorial intent, really presenting the entire story, or am I just making a selected reading of those elements I expect my reader to find palatable? Is it possible for the author to know what he or she has intended, or for any external reader to expect to have real access to this? Perhaps it is sensible, even significant, to keep in mind Iser's resolution to the question of self knowledge by recognising that "'self-fashioning' is how we answer our inaccessibility to ourselves" (Iser). In this paper I will examine two instances in which this self-fashioning is achieved and will draw parallels between these and my own intent in *Spiel*.

Spiel as a reading of Borges' reading of Dante

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- Want to play a game? the woman said.

- What? I said.
- A game. Do you want to play a game?
- What game?
- Is that all you can do? Ask questions?
- Who are you?

*

I reached my arm back and caressed her buttocks, then she moved so close that I could feel her breath on the side of my throat. That was it. I realised that this was the moment my whole life had been leading up to. I had finally seen a glimpse of the end of the game. This was my masterpiece.

- You can tell me now, she whispered.
- Tell you what?
She caressed my balls with the palm of her hand and I relaxed my back into her breasts.
- Your name. You can tell me your name.

*

Spiel is dotted with references to Dante Alighieri's magnum opus *Divina Commedia - The Divine Comedy* - and in the aspect of its central narrator's search for an absent object of desire, it is modelled on this great work of Italian literature. Drawing on Jorge Luis Borges' "Nine Dantesque Essays" on *The Divine Comedy* (Borges 2000: 267-305) my intent at this juncture is to explore how *Spiel* achieves the same effect as Borges' essays, of connecting the writer, as the primary reader of the text, with the figures animated within the text.

Dante's first great work, the autobiographical *La Vita Nuova* (Dante 1969) written between 1292 and 1300, celebrates what Dante perceives to be his new life after having first met fellow Florentine Beatrice Portinari (1266-1290) at age nine. It presents a series of poems and an account by the poet of the biographical context in which they were composed. It tells of Dante's devotion to the inaccessible Beatrice (they were both married) and how, after Beatrice's death, Dante became enamoured with another woman. He soon felt as if he had betrayed the memory of his first love, who he writes was "A thing from Heaven sent, to all she shows / A miracle in which the world many share" (Dante 1969: 76). His intent at the close of *La Vita Nuova*, after relating the vision he has had of Beatrice in heaven, is "to compose concerning her what has never been written in rhyme of any woman" (Dante 1969: 99).

The work that emerged was *The Divine Comedy* which was composed in the period between 1307 and 1314 (Musa 43). It traces the journey of its protagonist - Dante the Pilgrim - as he is led through the pit of the Inferno and up Mount Purgatory by the Poet Virgil. In Canto XXX of *Purgatory*, Dante the Poet has his fictional self finally standing on the threshold between the Earthly Paradise atop Mount Purgatory and the Heavenly Paradise, where he finally encounters Beatrice again for the first time since her death:

> ...[W]ithin a nebula of flowers
> that flowed upward from angels' hands and then
> poured down, covering all the chariot
> appeared a lady - over her white veil
> an olive crown and, under her green cloak,
> her gown, the color of eternal flame.
> And instantly - though many years had passed
> since last I stood trembling before her eyes,
> captured by adoration, stunned by awe -
> my soul, that could not see her perfectly,
> still felt, succumbing to her mystery
> and power, the strength of its enduring love.
> (Dante Canto XXX: 28-39)

In his essay "The Meeting in a Dream" Jorges Luis Borges contends that "Dante constructed the triple architecture of his poem in order to insert this encounter into it" (Borges 2000: 300). But the meeting is not a smooth one and Dante the Pilgrim still finds Beatrice, even in the Poet's own fantasised version of her, to be just as severe and inaccessible as she was in life. Borges writes that the encounter is "stained by sad obstructions" (Borges 2000: 300) and has to it the logic of a dream.

It occurs to me that Dante and I share this futile intention: to create a work of art simply to allow the dream-like performance of a meeting with an illusion. At the centre of *Spiel* is the meeting of my proxy - the novel's narrator - with my version of the unattainable woman, my Beatrice. The actual meeting in my case (which was so brief as to be almost forgettable) was with a woman in Berlin in 1991 and lasted only as long as the first act of Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute*. Dante's fictionalised encounter is played out on the fantastical threshold between Purgatory and Paradise, and I too have replayed my own actual encounter and have managed along the way to embellish it, idealise it, sex it up, add some mystery to it and twist it out of shape. Yet despite its unrecognisability I have still tried to maintain a definite sense of fidelity to my original desire: to re-imagine the encounter and by doing so to somehow actualise/textualise it again.

In *Spiel* the meeting between my versions of Dante and Beatrice takes place in a space and time where they have not identified themselves to one another. It is only when they do utter their names that they become "Karl Rein" and "Rosa Stumm". From this point on they take on concrete textual identities and their presence in the same space becomes impossible because "Rosa Stumm" is merely the narrator's own childhood invention, a figment of his imagination. In this sense they become just as absent for each other as Beatrice in death was for Dante, and as Dante was for Beatrice while she still lived. (Borges writes that "Beatrice existed infinitely for Dante. Dante very little, perhaps not at all, for Beatrice" (Borges 2000: 301).) It is impossible that they should ever be able to come together. They are defined by their absence from one another. It is as Borges describes in the last of the Dantesque Essays, "Beatrice's Last Smile" (Borges 2000: 302-305) that by the end of Dante's journey Beatrice must be eternally turned away from him, facing towards God, towards the heart of the Rose of Paradise (Dante 1986: Canto XXXI). Her continued absence is the only possible outcome that has any fidelity with the futility of Dante's purpose. But in *Spiel*, the encounter that precedes the final turning away takes place not as a climactic and long-awaited moment that occurs as the protagonist approaches the goal of his narrative; instead it occurs nearer its beginning. The narrator cannot see the futility of the search he embarks on, but I have him persist with it nonetheless. This is the lesson he must learn from his journey: to recognise the futility and sadness of the objective I share with Dante. He must see the truth in

Borges' lamentation that "[t]o fall in love is to create a religion with a fallible God" (Borges 2000: 300).

The object of desire as textual golem

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Do you have Lego in East Germany? Mama says that the government in East Germany is bad, like the Nazis, and that they are friends with the Russians who are also bad. I don't understand why everyone wants to have a war when they can be friends with each other. Like us.

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From Stasi File 234/197: It is proposed that…the Unknown Person become subject to the intent of the Ministry forthwith, and that she be released into my care for a period of extended re-education.

*

I have suggested that there exists a contiguity between the reader/author and the textual manifestations/reflections of that author. This contiguity is reflected in tales about the creation of human forms. The tale that is of most interest to me (and by virtue most pertinent in this reflection on *Spiel*) is the Jewish legend of the golem which, as the story of a man fashioned from clay and brought to life by metaphysical intervention, is most obviously grounded in the Creation story of the Old Testament, but also has common antecedents in the various versions of the Prometheus and Pygmalion myths.

At the heart of the stories and legends in the Jewish tradition which concern the creation of a man from clay is the mystical tradition of the Kabbalah. ("Kabbalah" taken literally means "tradition" (Scholem 1965: 1).) The tradition of widespread kabbalistic practice is dated by Gershom Scholem to the thirteenth century, (Scholem 1987: 3) although it draws on the *Sepher Yezirah* (trans. 1978), or *Book of Creation*, a text that emerged somewhere between the second and sixth centuries CE (Eco 28; Scholem 1987: 25). The tradition itself is concerned with the apprehension of the ten mystical Sefirot, or "divine emanations...in which God's power unfolds" (Scholem 1965: 35). The concept of the Sefirot was elaborated in the thirteenth-century *Book Bahir* and finally reached its most coherent form later in the same century with the *Zohar* (Scholem 1987: 44; Bloom 23, 24).

As a practice, or tradition of understanding, the Kabbalah's most important elements are related to the divination of the secret meaning of the Torah through the combination and recombination of the characters that constitute the Torah, that is, the twenty-two characters of the Hebrew alphabet. Scholem makes clear the

> deep-seated parallelism between the two most important kinds of symbolism used by Kabbalists to communicate their ideas. They speak of attributes and of spheres of light but in the same context they speak also of divine names and the letters of which they are composed. (Scholem 1965: 36)

Umberto Eco too highlights it as "[a] mystical current that regarded creation itself as a linguistic phenomenon" (Eco 25), as does Harold Bloom, who posits

the idea that the practitioners of the Kabbalah regard cause and effect as being "linguistic fictions" (Bloom 25).

Gershom Scholem in his chapter "The Idea of the Golem" in *The Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (Scholem 1965: 158-204) provides a comprehensive account of the evolution of the concept of the golem, and its relationship to the Kabbalah, as it extends over many centuries. Glinert tells us that while "the records are long on prescription and very short on actual description of golem making" (Glinert 80), yet it is clear that most of these prescriptions involved the use of combinations of letters and words, most specifically the combination of letters that articulated the secret name of God (Glinert 80).

It is worth noting that in the confluence of the Kabbalah and the manifestation of the golem, Scholem claims that "none of [the] instructions (for making and unmaking the golem) leave room between the act of animation and the act of transformation back into dust, for a pause during which the golem might exist outside the sphere of meditation' (Scholem 1965: 186). Glinert concurs that this was the case primarily in southern European kabbalistic circles and also agrees that in northern Europe the concept of the golem was somewhat different and existed in the popular imagination as a physical being rather than as a psychic or metaphysical phenomenon (Glinert 80).

This northern European golem in the 16th and 17th centuries becomes more a mechanical being, a servant automaton who can evolve into something potentially or actually dangerous, a mostly speechless being who, without being checked, will continue to grow to monstrous proportions and wreak havoc on a massive scale (Scholem 1965: 199-202). This version of the tale is most often attached to the tale of Rabbi Loew of Prague (1525-1609) and developed into the twentieth century novelisation of the golem.

The significant features of these Prague-centred folkloric and fictional golem tales are threefold. First, that the golem is formed from the clay taken from the banks of a river in Prague (usually named as the Moldau). Second, the physical inscription of the secret name of God either on the golem's forehead or on a tablet in its mouth which effectively acts as its on/off switch - the golem lives as long as the name is inscribed or the tablet remains in its mouth, but returns to its original inanimate state of clay when that name is removed. Third, and most important, the golem's assumption of the role of a redeemer, a just revenger, who acts as a kind of secret agent/superhero for Rabbi Loew in his endeavours to disprove the accusation of the blood-libel and other attacks against the Jewish community amongst whom he has made the golem manifest.

Borges, in his poem "The Golem" (Borges 1967: 77-79) makes another retelling of the Rabbi Loew golem legend, and while he makes significant use of the sense of the physicality of the golem (he refers to the object that is transformed as "a doll") he places emphasis on what is perhaps a reference to the more southern European kabbalistic understanding of the golem, which places primacy on its essentially textual and immaterial nature. He opens the poem with an idea that is typical of Borges on the library-like textuality of the world:

> If (as the Greek asserts in the Cratylus)
> The name is archetype to the thing,
> The rose is in the letters of 'rose'
> And the length of the Nile in 'Nile.' (Borges 1967: 77)

He goes on to emphasise that God is present in the name of God and that through the correct permutation of letters which results in the secret name of God, Rabbi Loew of Prague was able to transform the inanimate doll into a

living being which he calls "Golem". The discovery of the rose that is in "rose", the secret name of God that can bring life into dirt, is, in this case explicitly related to cracking a code.

Borges recognises that the generation of the name of God results not only in the physical incarnation of the golem but that it is also a linguistic act and as such is open to novelty. Making a golem is like writing a poem, or a work of fiction. To make his point he includes the following stanza:

> There was something too untoward in the Golem
> For at his approach the rabbi's cat
> Would hide. (This cat does not appear in Scholem
> But I intuit it across all these years.)
> (Borges 1967: 78)

The intuition that allows Borges to reveal - for the first time in golem history, no less - the frightened cat that has not appeared in any of the versions of the golem tales accounted for by the comprehensive Scholem in his essay "The Idea of the Golem", is that which demonstrates his understanding that there is no text to which nothing can be added. The golem legend, like any text, is never finally fixed, it is open to the writers - and readers - of the day to add to and subtract from as they please. One need only make some new combinations of letters and words, new acts of creation, and a new manifestation will become present in the world of the text. Borges presents us with his own modest novelty: a cat made of words.

My chief interest in the golem is in the aspect of the combination of words and letters to manifest a living being, in its meta-textual, if not quite metaphysical, sense. A contemporary version of the golem, which presents parallels with the thematic aspirations of *Spiel* in its speculation on the idea that its various characters and worlds are fictional presences, worlds made of words, is Ian Sinclair and Rachel Lichtenstein's *Rodinsky's Room* (Lichtenstein & Sinclair). When in 1980 the attic room above the former synagogue in East London's Princelet Street was opened for the first time in more than a decade it revealed what appeared to be a moment frozen in time. It attested to the presence in the room of its last occupant, David Rodinsky, in the days before his abandonment of the world of what had been Jewish East London in the late 1960s. The room was strewn with artefacts collected by Rodinsky across the thirty-odd years of his residence there, and seemed to point to some greater work of metaphysics he was engaged in - a kabbalistic journey perhaps - that was testified to by notes on the study of languages, obscure scribblings on maps, train ticket stubs, drawings, and significant newspaper headlines. Sinclair, a writer and filmmaker, and Lichtenstein, an artist, provide, in alternating chapters, an account of Lichtenstein's near-obsessive quest through the 1990s to reconstruct the true identity of the spectral David Rodinsky. As the narrative progresses, and before it reaches the clarity that the detective work it presumes eventually uncovers about the mundane fate of David Rodinsky, it becomes clear that Lichtenstein's quest, simultaneous with her reconstruction of David Rodinsky, is for a piecing-together of her own self, a connection to her sense of Jewishness. In this spirit, Sinclair touches upon the presence of Rodinsky in Lichtenstein's life as a golem. After all it was as a golem that she first came into contact with Rodinsky's room, as a film, *The Golem of Princelet Street*, was being made in 1991 at the very site of the former synagogue (Lichtenstein & Sinclair 179). Sinclair draws on the twentieth-century tradition of the golem in Meyrink and in Bloch, and notes the manner in which Rodinsky's story has been co-opted to match the story, characterised mainly by the essential absence, the intangibility, of the golem himself, remembering that in some tales the golem is able to become invisible (Bloch 69). He writes of Lichtenstein's journey:

> She's waiting for a voice. She wants Rodinsky to dictate his story. She tells me that treating her quest like a detective story brings the Spitalfields investigation into a parallel relationship with her Talmudic studies. In Israel her teachers taught her to make numerous readings from three sentences. Weeks, months in the desert, picking the same words apart. Letters as numbers. Words broken and reformed. The search for truth, illumination, and the meditations on Rodinsky were indivisible acts. The scholar had vanished into the text. (Lichtenstein & Sinclair 189)

The sense here is that Rodinsky is nothing if not a text; one that falls to Lichtenstein to reconstruct either randomly as she sees fit or according to some essential truth about his life.

As I have been reflecting on the relevance of the figure of the golem to *Spiel*, it occurs to me that I am constantly discovering (or possibly inventing) uncanny coincidences between my work and the figure of the golem. Perhaps, by not discovering the idea of the golem until after most of *Spiel* had been written, I have been able to avoid what Catherine Padmore points out as a mistake in her attempt at conscious mythmaking in the writing of her PhD novel *Leavings* in whose exegesis she writes:

> I came to realise that myths do not arrive in the world deliberately, fully formed like Athena from Zeus's head. Myths exist because stories are told and retold, each telling paving the way for the next version or variant. Myths exist because people tell stories to each other over time. These stories are not universal or transcendent. They are rooted in a time and place, but are pliable enough to fit the moment of their next enunciation. (Padmore 344)

When I discovered the golem I kept tripping over the parallels between it and *Spiel*, and wondered if I had somehow tapped into what the neo-classical architect Karl Friedrich Schinkel articulates as the role of the artist - to enter into the "unbreakable chain of the universe" (Schinkel in Pundt 195). The narrator of *Spiel* is commensurate with Rachel Lichtenstein, he is an active participant in the attempt to reconstruct an object of desire, an object that turns out to be a reflection of himself. Rosa Stumm and David Rodinsky are both textual golems, but Rosa Stumm is an utterly secular golem, one who cannot be invoked through the Great Work of the mystical Kabbalah. Just as *Rodinsky's Room* is the Great Work that manifests Rodinsky, the Great Work that brings Rosa Stumm into being is *Spiel*. It is through this work that Rosa Stumm is brought to life. In *Spiel* it is the letters of the child that first invoke this manifestation. The child invents an imaginary correspondent in Berlin, someone who has never existed, or at least if she has existed then the readers of the text do not have access to the space in which the young boy first has the spark of her invention; where he finds the name is not for us to know, it is not recorded. The narrator, as a grown man, does not take the time to reflect on this origin. Perhaps it is this lack of reflection that should give the reader cause to reflect on him. To wonder what the barrier between his self of the past and self of the present actually is.

In my *Spiel* - my permutation of/play with the characters of the English language - apart from the child's letters, Rosa Stumm is once again named and given shape in the Stasi file in which her story is told and which again has parallels to the golem. In this case, just as the golem of Prague is formed from the mud of the River Moldau, Rosa Stumm is extracted from the river Spree and has life breathed into her by the powerful figure who will become her mentor.

Her Rabbi Loew is a Stasi controller. As Rosa Stumm comes to life she is silted in river muck, dirtied by the mud and fecal waste of divided Berlin's River Spree, but also by her own opaque past.

When Scholem speaks of the novelistic golem stories, in which "the golem takes on the entirely new function of combating lies about ritual murder" (Scholem 1965: 189, Note 1) my interest is again piqued. I want to discover in these legends of creation why people may have been motivated to make a living being in the first place. The motivations seem to echo the age. In an age of devotion, the need seems to be solely to demonstrate the power of God, but in later times it had a redeeming feature: the ability to redeem the community in the face of persecution. Its purpose was to demonstrate truth. In *Spiel* I am recasting this attribute of the golem in a manner similar to Sinclair's projection of the golem story onto David Rodinsky. The attributes of the golem depend on the need for that golem, a shapeless form that is present in traces, one who demonstrates the presences which have passed away, the absent connections to a place. David Rodinsky is the connection to a Jewish heritage in London that has evaporated into the suburbs, council flats and death. In this same sense Rosa Stumm is a connection to a Berlin that I, and my narrator, have never known. Rosa is, like the golem, *stumm*. Neither can speak in their own voice. Rosa Stumm is a silenced echo of the past. This silent Rosa Stumm is a reverberation of that other Rosa - Rosa Luxemburg - who, as a victim of the proto-fascism that emerged in the chaos that chewed up Berlin after the collapse of the monarchy at the end of the Great War, is forever tied to Berlin (Nettl). So too is Rosa Stumm a golem who is shaped in the form of German Green Party pioneer Petra Kelly, that admirer of Luxemburg's, who also died at the point of a gun (Parkin).

Tradition has it that the golem, when the name is erased from his head, or the tablet is taken from his mouth, is traditionally kept, like the legend of Rodinsky, in an upstairs room of the Synagogue and is from time to time seen wandering the streets of the Jewish quarter of Prague like a ghost. When I think of Rosa Stumm as a golem it seems too neat to be a coincidence that I have written her in the story as a resident in Sophienstrasse, a street which is only a short distance from Berlin's New Synagogue, that she lives across the street from another house of worship, the Sophien Church, and that her home is at the heart of the Scheunenviertel, the once teeming Jewish quarter of Berlin. Rosa is a manifestation of other desires, other women. All absent. All impossible. Lost. Dead.

The creation/creature animates the absent. In making his comparison of Rodinsky to the golem, Sinclair engages with what Glinert makes reference to as the symbolic purpose of the golem as the Other (Glinert 84). When Glinert asked Cynthia Ozick what she thought a golem was he was told that "...the Golem is what we all carry within us; the Golem is Kafka's K and Kafka recognized that K was his Golem because he called him 'K' for Kafka. It was self-recognition" (Glinert 88). With his German heritage, the narrator of *Spiel* exists by virtue of not having been Jewish in Nazi Germany. The fact of the presence of this narratorial voice evokes something close to guilt in the narrator, some need to explain himself, to voice the absence that his grandparents' generation allowed to be carved out of their world. Rosa Stumm is a golem, but she is a failed golem. She is an impossible salve to a conscience that bears part of the burden of the Shoah. This golem cannot be a messianic redeemer, she must frustrate the narrator - she must be pursued forever but never be attained.

Terminal ends in the lines of desire

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I went into Mama and Papa's room and found Mama's old photos…I saw one of my Opa that I never saw before…He is wearing a sign on his arm like in Hogan's Heroes*. It looks like a black spider.*

*

It was there. A fingernail-sized scrap of paper that fluttered out and fell to the floor like a dried out little moth…It was a torn fragment of a photograph…I picked it up on the end of my finger then did what I had been wanting to do since I arrived in Berlin. I started to cry the tears of a homesick little boy who can never go home.

*

Margaret Atwood claims that "not just some, but all writing is motivated deep down, by a fear of and a fascination with mortality - by a desire to make the risky trip to the Underworld, and to bring something or someone back from the dead' (Atwood 156). But to my mind Atwood's all-encompassing claim makes too broad a sweep. Alberto Manguel (Manguel 178) points out that early writing had a highly practical purpose. The stories that the early scribes marked on clay tablets indicated the number of oxen in the field that they owned. These pictographs perhaps tell a story in themselves which keeps Atwood's broad claim relevant but nevertheless moderates it. Perhaps the desire to write is to animate an entity which is absent, which has become lost or silenced. The role of accounting for oxen was to be able to remember how many oxen one owned. This text would become most useful when it became necessary to account for any absences. Theft and poor management are equally to blame for the absence of oxen as is death. Consider the case of someone like Binjamin Wilkomirski, whose writings seem to point to a desire to supplant his real self with a desired self as a victim (Maecheler 269). He pursues his imagined identity in order to compensate for his absent mother, and he imagines that this absence is so great that it is possible to him to be a heroic survivor-victim, rather than a mundane abandoned child.

If we equate the voice of the narrator of the memories of childhood in *W or The Memory of Childhood* with its author, Georges Perec, we can find some further ideas about the significance of writing and its relation to death. After writing, in introduction to his fragmentary and double-layered text, "I have no childhood memories" (Perec 6) Perec goes on to claim of his stories, just a few paragraphs later, that, "in the crisscross web they [his stories] weave as in my reading of them I know there is to be found the inscription and the description of the path I have taken, the passage of my history and the story of my passage" (Perec 7). Here we find ourselves as readers in a contradictory position of understanding. We might take this to mean that memories are somehow other to the words in the text, or on the other hand it may be understood as an indication that writing is an activity that is able to fashion new memories where there are none, or to rescue those which have been lost. However, in all senses (and despite the heaviness with which death looms over Perec's text) rather than reaching into Atwood's underworld, Perec is stressing the importance of placing text in the stead of memory, the rescuing of the self from a textless past.

So, in light of the doubts cast over the absolute relationship between death and writing by the previous examples, how do I test Atwood's sense of writing against my work? When I read those texts that have given me a direction in trying to understand the shape of my work - Dante and Rachel Lichtenstein in particular - it is clear that these two texts certainly are motivated to return one

who has died to a state of animation, and so might it be in my search for the right end to *Spiel* that I have come to recognise that I too am grappling with death.

In *Spiel* the character Rosa Stumm is to the narrator, and (I admit) to me as her author, what Beatrice and the Divine Rose are to Dante, she is what the redeeming golem is to eastern European Jewry, what Rodinsky is to Lichtenstein: an object that finds its manifestation in a text that projects into the meta-textual world (on whose boundary I myself stand as the gatekeeper) those complexities, contradictions and impossibilities that lie at the heart of my most profound desire, the answer to the question: Who am I?

But if this question cannot be resolved until the story of my ego, "I"," is at its end, then the resultant confrontation of mortality is the inextricably linked question: Why do I write? What has been my motivation in devoting so much industry and so much time to the practice of telling a single story? Can it be isolated to just these two discrete phenomena: the absence of a woman and the weight of twentieth-century German history on my narrow shoulders? Perhaps I am merely attempting to pre-empt my own death by telling stories about my ultimate confrontation with death, to account for the future absence of myself before my absence has become manifest.

I have made gestures here and there throughout this paper about the possibilities of articulating statements of intent about my own work of fiction, and end by asking whether such a text, a "factual" narrative that might trace more clearly the lines of desire I have followed in the creation of *Spiel*, is necessary, or whether that intent is most clearly told in the text of *Spiel* itself.

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