WHO GETS TO MOLD THE CLAY? QUESTIONS OF POST-SHOAH FICTION IN *THE AMAZING ADVENTURES OF KAVALIER & CLAY*

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Abstract: The ethical complexity inherent in describing, memorializing, and engaging with the Shoah continues to exert strong ethical claims in literary genres that, for the most part, have distanced themselves from all normative ethical claims. Post-Shoah fictional writing has been a hotly contested area with supporters viewing it as an essential part of passing on a cultural memory of the Shoah and critics lamenting the dramatization of the Shoah through imaginative mediums. Michael Chabon continues a long tradition, grounded in the writings of Elie Wiesel, of grappling with the Shoah through the use of fictional tropes in his Pulitzer prize-winning novel, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*. An analysis of Chabon's text, and the ethical critiques it has engendered, offers insight into the ongoing struggle of Shoah representation in the twenty-first century.

In this paper, I first offer a brief overview of the ethical considerations posed by post-Shoah fictional writing. I then argue that the uses of Houdini and the Golem in the text as ways of embodying responses to the Shoah ultimately fail to offer an ethically defensible engagement with the Shoah and popularize a sentimentality that undermines the Shoah's tangible loss of human life.

Summary of the Novel: The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay follows the travails of Josef Kavalier, a teenager who escapes Nazi-occupied Prague hidden in the coffin of the Golem. He ends up becoming a commercially successful comic book illustrator with help from his cousin, Sammy Clay, who narrates Josef's comic strips. The two successfully make a name for themselves in the Golden Age of comic books with the creation of the Escapist, a superhero loosely based on Harry Houdini. Everything seems bright amidst unlooked-for love; Rosa Saks offers Josef the chance at an American family while Tracy Bacon, the strapping young voice actor for the Escapist, offers Sammy the possibility of a queer relationship amidst the silence and homophobia of 1940's America. The joy does not last, however, when Josef's younger brother, Thomas, dies while fleeing to the United States. Josef enlists in the U.S. Army, prompting Sammy to enter suburban America as a replacement-husband to Rosa and father-figure to Josef's newly born son. Both grapple with the trauma of loss amidst the larger trauma of the Shoah, forever present in the background. Josef eventually returns to his place as head of the household thanks in part to the healing properties of the Golem, as Sammy packs up for greener climes on the West Coast.

The Shoah,[1] the Hebrew term that refers to the genocide of up to six million Jews at the hands of the Nazis during the Third Reich, continues to cast a dark shadow over social, political, and religious discourses around the world. Its signification of loss, trauma, and

[1] Jewish scholars of the period frequently use the term Shoah since the root of the word Holocaust refers to the Hebrew term for "offering to God."

anti-Semitism remains unquantifiable. The Shoah demands continual memorialization, reference, and recognition because of the immensity of its state-driven loss of life; in the words of Elie Wiesel, "to forget the dead would be akin to killing them a second time."[2] The project of representing the Shoah in art has only become more complex with the passage of time, as its focus has shifted. Once concentrated on the dissemination of survivor testimony and influencing immediate public and social policies, post-Shoah artistic engagement now concerns itself with the passing down of firsthand accounts to future generations. The voices of the children—and even grandchildren—of survivors have taken up the mantle of Shoah discourse. In this passing of the guard, "practitioners of cultural memory work have focused on the transmission of memory to the next generations" in a process that produces "a vicarious form of witnessing, or witnessing by proxy, through the staging of an empathetic identification with Holocaust witnesses and something approximating the remembrance of their experiences from their point of view."[3]

The ethical dimensions of this new form of vicarious witnessing, of the formation of secondary and tertiary memory, have been vexed not just by the passage of time but by the production of fictional and semi-fictional accounts of the Shoah. Works such as *Maus*, which remains one of the most recognizable works of post-Shoah American fiction, grappled with the destruction of the Shoah through the use of zoomorphic graphic characters, but the blurring of historical definitiveness and fictitious representation can be traced back to Elie Wiesel's firsthand account in *Night*. This incorporation of fictitious elements in accounts of the Shoah has added fuel to the already raging arguments on the ethical and moral implications of depicting its atrocities and aftermath. Few subjects in the twentieth century have received the sort of ethical injunctions surrounding its artistic production.

Yet this strand of literary production considers the facts and figures of the genocide to be unable to impart the full human cost of the Shoah. Post-Shoah fiction deploys fantastical devices to bridge this divide between historical accounts and the minds of readers. Michael Chabon offered the first mainstream fictional response to the Shoah in the twenty-first century with the publication of his Pulitzer prize-winning novel, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, in 2001. The novel explores the ramifications of the Shoah in the Wieselian tradition, following two cousins, Josef Kavalier and Sammy Clay, as they navigate the world of the comic book industry from the late 1930's to the early 1950's. An analysis of Chabon's text, and the ethical critiques it has engendered, offers insight into the ongoing struggle of Shoah representation in the twenty-first century.

Chabon installs two archetypal Jewish figures in his narrative to grapple with the legacy of the Shoah, and each embodies a specific set of responses to it. The first appears in relation to Josef Kavalier and elides the Shoah with notions of escape, individuality, and containment. It consolidates in the image of Harry Houdini. Josef's practicing of magic tricks provides him with "a masturbatory intensity of concentration that became almost more pleasurable for him than the trick itself."[4] His mentor, an old Jewish master of escape acts, Bernard Kornblum, describes Josef as, "one of those unfortunate boys who become

[2] Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. by Marion Wiesel (New York, NY: Hill and Wang), xv.

[3] Richard Crownshaw, *The Afterlife of Holocaust Memory in Contemporary Literature and Culture* (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2010), vi.

[4] Michael Chabon, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (New York, NY: Random House, 2012, first published in 2000), 25.

escape artists […] for dangerously metaphorical reasons. Such men feel imprisoned by invisible chains—walled in, sewn up in layers of batting."[5] Josef, chained and stuffed into a sack, even goes so far as to plunge into the icy waters of the Vltava; the stunt nearly kills him.[6] Confinement and the ensuing act of auto-liberation become a source of identification, erotic pleasure, and masculine dominance for Josef.

Josef tries to embody a particular type of Jewish masculinity espoused by Houdini in the decades before the Shoah. Harry Houdini showcased a masculinity rooted in the literal ability of one man to throw off the shackles of physical restraint and the figurative ability of a Jewish man to craft a glorified public identity over and above anti-Semitic and anti-immigrant rhetoric. It was based in conceptions of personal prowess, invulnerability, and bodily escape. Harry Houdini's meteoric rise to prominence depended upon his turning the male body from a site of weakness and vulnerability into a location of domination and triumph, for "behind Houdini's police challenges stood the often-sadomasochistic contents between torturers and victims that so fascinated the melodramatic imagination."[7] Houdini was also known to insert himself into "what might be regarded as an especially provocative feminized position: naked, bound, bent over, inspected, even to a degree penetrated. His victimization was thus not only political (a loss of freedom) but gendered (a loss of masculinity)."[8] His mainstream success was a result of his challenging police departments to a battle of containment: he challenged them to exercise all of the powers of the state to control and diminish the male body only to then regain mastery of said body.

The drama of Houdini's acts relied on the demasculinization and depersonalization inherent in these self-created situations; crowds applauded uproariously at the radical transformation of the male body. Houdini successfully turned his physical presence into a site of gendered contestation and his struggle for bodily autonomy was his attempt to reinscribe masculine ideals—autonomy, control, strength—onto his person. "The drama of submission and release, bodily risk and mastery goes deeply to issues of masculine prowess and identity," and it is for this reason that the crowds which flocked to Houdini's feats of escape were "mostly men and boys."[9] This same desire to define one's "masculinity […] in terms of the ability to overcome the body and the subjection of the body to the will" is at the heart of Josef's attempts to embody the masculine ideal projected by Houdini.[10] The restraining, dehumanization, and ultimate murdering of millions of Jews by the Nazi state shattered the image of the invincible, individual male offered by Houdini. The Shoah exposes the naiveté and danger of a masculine ideal that does not take into account the threat of state-sanctioned violence and mass prejudice.

Chabon draws attention to this flaw of a Houdini-esque response to the Shoah–personalized, valorized, and ultimately ungrounded in the political realities of others—through his placement of Houdini citations in the novel. "A drawing of Harry Houdini"

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[5] Ibid., 37.

[6] Ibid., 35.

[7] John Kasson, *Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man: The White Male Body and the Challenge of Modernity in America* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 2002), 114.

[8] Ibid., 116.

[9] Ibid., 123-124.

[10] Louise Colbran, "The Grand Illusion: Hegemonic Masculinity as Escapism in Michael Chabon's The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay and Wonder Boys," in *Cambridge Scholars* (2010), 120.

given to Joe by his brother, Tommy, symbolizes the ideological connection between Josef and Tommy and the promise of escape from mechanisms of bodily control.[11] Josef carries this drawing on his person at all times, an illustration that promises the freedom of the self from the various systems and multiplicities of power. It is described as "Harry Houdini, taking a calm cup of tea in the middle of the sky," and later as him "falling from the belly of the airplane […] smiling, and pouring a cup of tea from an elaborate plummeting tea service."[12]Alone and aloft, Houdini engages in the everyday act of brewing tea made extraordinary by his being situated outside of the "sphere of power relations" that determine the expected and the possible.[13]

The citation of Houdini and its dream of escapement cannot withstand the trauma of the Shoah. Josef leaves the sketch—which he has carried for more than 400 pages—behind after killing a German soldier in a scene remarkable for its psychological realism and refutation of epic portrayals of war.[14] Josef allows the drawing to freeze over in the farthest reaches of Antarctica, and the portrayal of an individualistic response to the Shoah in the text freezes over with it. The novel then shifts to give greater weight to its second personified response to the dilemma of responding to the Shoah, the character of the Golem.

Chabon presents the golem that surfaces at key moments in the text as none other than the golem historically attributed to Rabbi Judah Loew of Prague.[15] While several versions of the formation of the golem exist—the first reference to the golem can be traced as far back as Psalm 139:15-16[16] —the hulking mass of clay in Chabon's text is believed to have been created by Rabbi Judah Loew in the sixteenth century to protect the Jewish community of Prague.[17] In the most widely referenced origin story, popularized by Rabbi Yudl Rosenberg at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Christians of Prague believed that the Jews needed the blood of Christians to make matzo, the traditional unleavened Passover bread, and proceeded to beat and murder their Jewish neighbors.[18]

In response to the increased violence, Loew, after praying to God and receiving a surprisingly useful mystical ritual, brings to life an unthinking golem that obeys his every

[11] Chabon, *The Amazing Adventures*, 66.

[12] Ibid., 66, 468.

[13] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, trans, by Robert Hurley (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1990), 97.

[14] Chabon, *The Amazing Adventures*, 464-465.

[15] Alan L. Berger, "Michael Chabon's 'The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay': The Return of the Golem," in *Studies in American Jewish Literature,* vol. 29, no. 1 (2010), 83.

[16] "My bones are not hidden from you, when I was made in secret, fashioned in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw me unformed; in your book all are written down; my days were shaped before one came to be." Translated in the *New American Bible* as "me unformed," the original Hebrew word גלמי can also be translated as "my golem," and also appears in references to Adam before God imparted the breath of life.

[17] Chabon, *The Amazing Adventures*, 46; Elizabeth R. Baer, *The Golem Redux: From Prague to Post-Holocaust Fiction* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2012), 18.

[18] European Christians often cited this belief, known as blood libel, to initiate pogroms against the Jews. While blood libel rhetoric has been traced back to 1148 in England and continued into the end of the nineteenth century, no such cases in Prague during the time of Rabbi Loew have been recorded. See Baer, *The Golem Redux*, 32.

command.[19] The golem proceeds to punish the anti-Semites. Once peace returns, Rabbi Loew decommissions the golem by reversing the mystical ritual and sealing its body in the attic of the Old New Synagogue, the oldest active synagogue in Europe.[20]

The golem legend has resurfaced in various historical periods and its significations have only multiplied with age. Amidst Adorno's famous claim that "writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" and Wiesel's that Auschwitz "defeated culture; later, it defeated art," poets have struggled to find an effective yet respectful way of writing in the aftermath of the Shoah.[21] In response, many "took up the golem theme to commemorate Jewish life and the Shoah. [T]hey drew on its existing tradition as a figure of protection and messianic redemption together with those motifs of the story associated more clearly with anti-Semitic meanings."[22] In this context, the golem calls forth an endangered Eastern European Jewish heritage, embodies calls for justice and righteous anger, and represents the promise of redemption at the heart of the Hebrew Scriptures. In her expansive historiography of the golem legend, Gelbin argues that "Jewish poets explicitly drew out the ambivalence and instability of the literary golem figure to convey the violent destruction of the Jewish dialogue with German culture by the Shoah."[23] Yet the golem does not stop at "dialogue" but rather, in its unmitigated physicality, calls forth the material loss of possessions, limbs, and life inflicted on the Jews of Europe.

Chabon does not stick with mere allusions but rather picks up where Rosenberg left off in the telling of the golem legend. In the novel, Josef and his mentor, Kornblum, are tasked with finding Loew's Golem, which they eventually discover and successfully smuggle out of Prague by disguising it as a recently deceased strongman.[24] While the Golem is unable to protect the modern Jewish population of Prague, it metaphorically saves Josef by allowing him to stow away under its immense girth and slip across the carefully controlled border of Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia.[25]

The novel does not deploy golem rhetoric uniformly; while the first citation portrays the golem as a Jewish safeguard and fixture of Eastern European ancestry, latter appearances connect the golem to the production, appeal, and staying power of comic book masculinity. When Josef must quickly sketch a comic book superhero to show a potential investor, he draws an interpretation of the Golem of Prague. When the investor asks, "Is that the Golem?" Josef replies that "To me, this Superman is . . . maybe . . . only an Amer-

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[19] Yudl Rosenberg, *The Golem and the Wondrous Deeds of the Maharal of Prague*, trans. by Curt Leviant (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 35-37.

[20] Ibid., 185.

[21] While Adorno's best known phrase is "writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric," it is important to note that he later considered the statement too bombastic and distanced himself from it. See Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. by E. B. Ashton (New York, NY: Seabury, 1973), 362; Elie Wiesel, "Art and the Holocaust: Trivializing Memory," in *The New York Times,* June 11, 1989, 1, online.

[22] Gelbin traces the use of the golem in post-Shoah fiction to the poet Nancy Sachs who claimed that "the golem represents the destruction of Jewish lives during the Shoah, but also the indestructability and sanctity of the Jewish people." See Cathy S. Gelbin, *The Golem Returns: From German Romantic Literature to Global Jewish Culture, 1808-2008* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2011), 124.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Chabon, *The Amazing Adventures*, 61.

[25] Ibid., 65.

ican Golem."[26] Josef's response exposes the conceit governing the new rise of the comic book genre as a reapplication of the conceit of the Golem.[27] This instance, one of many in the text, hints at the Jewish cultural touchstones that served as the ideological base of the comic book industry during its height in the late 1940's. The long relationship between the golem and comic book superheroes has continued into the current day, with several golem comics being produced and a myriad of characters—the most famous being Marvel's Hulk—interpreted as modernized golems.[28]

The creation of this second golem, as artistic endeavor and profitable enterprise, universalizes golem iconography through the production of an easily consumed alternative history. American exceptionalism and comic book idealism replaces the Kabalistic roots and iniquitous historicism of the mythic tale. This process mirrors Chabon's generation of an alternative history in the novel, one that "approaches the representation of memory of that place as a construction of strategies for an ongoing *re*negotiation of that historical reality."[29] This confluence of historical particulars and imaginative possibilities allows for a post-Shoah novel that resonates with a modern audience, but it simultaneously risks dramatizing, obfuscating, and sensationalizing the genocidal intent and desecration of human life that delineates the Shoah.

The final appearance of the golem in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* further complicates this endeavor. In a novel that works exceedingly hard to avoid direct references to the Shoah, this last appearance has received much scholarly attention as the passage which most directly confronts the mass murder and traumatic loss of the Shoah. As Sammy marshals his energies to seek out greener pastures and Joe settles into suburban life with his wife and son, a mysterious package arrives. Joe recognizes it as the casket which once held the Golem of Prague, except that he "knew that something was wrong" since the weightlessness of the Golem—attributed to its soullessness—had been replaced by something "like a suite of bones."[30] Upon opening:

> The air was filled with a heady green smell of mud and river scum, with a stench of summer rich with remembered tenderness and regret.
>
> "Dirt," Tommy said, glancing anxiously at his mother.
>
> "Joe," Rosa said, "that isn't— those aren't *ashes*."
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> The entire box was filled, to a depth of about seven inches, with a fine powder, pigeon-gray and opalescent, that Joe recognized from his boyhood excursions as the silty bed of the Moldau. […] It was strange, Joe thought, that the box

[26] Chabon, *The Amazing Adventures*, 86.

[27] Lee Behlman, "The Escapist: Fantasy, Folklore, and the Pleasures of the Comic Book in Recent Jewish American Holocaust Fiction," in *Shofar,* vol. 22, no. 3 (2004), 67.

[28] R. G. Weiner, "Marvel Comics and the Golem Legend," in *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies*, vol. 29, no. 2 (2011), 56.

[29] Chabon engages in what Sidra Ezrahi, famed post-Holocaust theorist and critic, deems "alternative histories" or "sideshadowing" throughout his oeuvre; he writes narratives that focus on the what if's, might have's, and would have been's of the Shoah by blending fact and fiction, realistic occurrence and inventive possibilities. His novel *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, placed in a Jewish settlement in Sitka, Alaska, after the destruction of the Israel state in 1948, epitomizes this world-making project. See Baer, *The Golem Redux*, 11.

[30] Chabon, *The Amazing Adventures*, 608.

> should weigh so much more, now, than it had when the Golem was still intact. […Joe] reached in and took a handful of the pearly silt, pondering it, sifting it through his fingers, wondering at what point the soul of the Golem had reentered its body, or if possibly there could be more than one lost soul embodied in all that dust, weighing it down so heavily.[31]

The Golem has disintegrated. The italicization of ashes calls attention to the equating of the dust of the Golem to the ashes of the Jewish people, cremated in the ovens of concentration camps. The mysterious weight of the package is thought to stem from the "more than one lost soul" that "weigh[s] it down so heavily," the spiritual debris of the Shoah incarnate in the pulverized remains of the Golem. This metaphorical gesture turns the dust of the Golem and its connection to Shoah victims into a handy plot device that provides narrative continuity and reflects the conciliatory conclusion of the novel.

The reference to the souls of lost Jewish civilians through the medium of the golem engages in the exact type of sensationalistic rhetoric that post-Shoah theorists warn against. Critics have deemed the reintroduction of the golem a "somewhat clumsy and therefore unconvincing narrative device, particularly for a writer who is usually so consummately in command of his plot" and read it as an attempt to "give more heft and relevance to the superhero comic book dream of escape, [but] it's not clear that the concept of escapism itself can properly assume such a weight."[32] While "the protagonist is at peace psychologically and emotionally," this peace stops at the border of the family unit, and "it does not address the broader and classically Jewish notion of tikkun ha'olam (repair of the world)."[33] More passionate supporters of only realistic, historically verifiable representations of the Shoah have stated that in the passage "the Shoah is transformed into a metaphor and there is no distinction between the mysticism of hope and the Nazi mysticism of death."[34] Chabon's avoidance of direct reference to the Shoah in his expansive text hiccups momentarily and expels a passage that fails so utterly to represent the Shoah that it almost affirms his drive to avoid it altogether. Perhaps Anna Hunter states it best when she writes that "by approaching the Holocaust through the frame of fairy-tale narrative, we can comfort ourselves that we have looked into the abyss and have come to know ourselves again. In reality, of course, we have not even come close."[35]

Chabon struggles to weave the material loss of the Shoah into his multifaceted narrative. The Shoah produces a present absence, a tangible emptiness, an overflowing void in the novel. Like a black hole that sucks in all matter and refuses to let go, the Shoah exerts a constant pressure on the text which complicates its interplay of masculine identifications, comic book conceits, and suburban America ending. The novel's citations of Harry Houdini and the Golem of Prague ultimately fail to memorialize the Shoah without dramatizing

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[31] Ibid., 610-612.

[32] Behlman, "The Escapist," 69.

[33] Berger, "The Return of the Golem," 88.

[34] Andrzej Gąsiorek, "Michael Chabon, Howard Jacobson, and Post-Holocaust Fiction," in *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 53, no. 4 (2012), 883.

[35] Anna Hunter, "Tales from Over There: The Uses and Meanings of Fairy-Tales in Contemporary Holocaust Narrative," in *Modernism/modernity,* vol. 20, no. 1 (2013), 73.

it. The collective urn of Shoah victims gets sent away to a corner of the attic, a postscript to the project of suburban, American homebuilding, at the conclusion of a novel that reflects the contradictory and unresolved impulses of post-Shoah fictional representation in the twenty-first century.

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