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OTHER POSSIBLE WARS: GENRE, METAFICTION AND THE ETHICS OF ART IN MICHAEL CHABON'S *THE AMAZING ADVENTURES OF KAVALIER AND CLAY*

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In the last few decades, American fiction has aimed to explore the ethical possibilities of language and art. In this new tradition, Michael Chabon combines plots and motifs from American popular culture with postmodern narrative techniques with a double purpose: exploring the meanings of contemporary Jewish identity, and interrogating the legitimacy of American myths and narratives. Chabon's acclaimed novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (2000) is an example of Jewish-American fiction that explores the question of Jewish identity in post-war America through the motifs of exile, popular culture, and superhero narratives. In doing so, however, it also considers the ethical problems of surviving the Shoah and thriving surrounded by multiple fictions.

This paper examines Chabon's use of metafictional strategies as well as the meanings of creativity within the ontological frame of the main characters, arguing that Chabon stands at an intersection between the self-reflexive practice of postmodernist fiction and the ethical possibilities of narrative and art. Despite the critiques against Chabon's ethically deviant approach to Holocaust history, *Kavalier and Clay* advocates fiction as a powerful tool that

reveals the possibilities and responsibilities of writing the self in a collective (hi)story.

Keywords: Michael Chabon; Jewish American fiction; Metafiction; Trauma; Ethics

1. Introduction: Chabon's Approach to Contemporary Jewish American Writing

1.1. New Sincerity and Literary Ethics

Michael Chabon's novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (2000, hereafter *Kavalier and Clay*) explores the ethical costs of escaping the Holocaust and surviving the violence of postwar America through a multi-perspective story of exile and displacement. The novel begins when Josef "Joe" Kavalier, a young Jewish man and amateur escape artist, flees his native Prague during the Nazi occupation to live in Brooklyn with his American-born cousin Samuel "Sammy" Clay. Hoping to earn enough money to help his family out of the Nazi occupation, Joe accepts his cousin's proposal to join the comic book business as a draftsman. Centered on the two cousins' creation of The Escapist, a Superman-like superhero inspired by Harry Houdini, the novel reflects on how their lives are simultaneously affected by the political violence that they experience and by the stories that they imagine.

Chabon's imaginative, openly experimental approach to the Jewish past has often been criticized as too sentimental or nostalgic (see e.g. Rovner 2011; Aarons and Berger 2017, 126-30). Awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2001 and a New York Times Bestseller for over a year (see e.g. Maslin 2000), *Kavalier and Clay* has also been accused of trivializing the experience of the European Jews through the motif of escapism through superhero fantasies and ancient Hebrew mysticism. As John Podhoretz (2001) argues, many of the Jews living in Europe under the Nazi regime were not invested in the magical powers attributed to the Golem of Prague. Neither would they feel any relief from the promise of escapism that hardly

applies to the protagonists. Similarly, Alan Berger suggests that "there are two unhappy results of escapism. The first is that one cannot escape the Holocaust any more than one can escape the impact of Rome's destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. Second, escapism leads to forgetting. And forgetting is the ultimate form of Holocaust denial" (2010, 88).

Against the critiques of Chabon's disregard for the memory and dignity of the European Jews –both victims and survivors–, others have looked at the question of escapism as a creative act towards the future. Among this group, Lee Behlman has vindicated the novel's self-conscious defense of the escapist power of fiction, which can activate human creativity and turn it into a regenerative capacity against individual and collective trauma (2004, 68). This paper supports this position, vindicating the novel's creative mobilization of the narrative of exile, seeing in this experience a juncture between the Jewish and the American histories and futures.

That said, a caveat is necessary, since I agree on Chabon's recurrent indulgence in a nostalgic, idealized sketch of European Jews, and on his resignation to engage with a collective sense of loss. At the same time, I suggest that this ethical slippage is not Chabon's failure to write an epic that synthesizes the Jewish past, present, and future, as much as a statement on the impossibility to do so from his evidently privileged place as an American, a non-witness, and a highly marketable author. The idea of Chabon's reckoning with his one's own ethical limitations, while trying to offer a creative alternative for collective healing informs a late postmodern approach to art and literature as always already compromised by a dominant ethos and by the socioeconomic politics of the book market (see e.g. Haselstein et al. 2010, 23).

In this respect, Adam Kelly (2016) identifies Chabon's work within a tradition commonly known as "New Sincerity writing," along with that of others like David Foster Wallace, Dave Eggers, Jennifer Egan, or George Saunders. The notion of New Sincerity suggests a more complex, post-postmodern conception of the long-disputed notion of truth. As Kelly explains, the writers included in this group refuse the preoccupation with aesthetic perfection and artistic autonomy of their modernism and postmodernism

predecessors (Kelly 2016, 200). Yet this reaction implied a form of continuation of the movements above mentioned, especially the latter: "[Postmodern] theory has taught contemporary writers […] that sincerity, expressed through language, can never be pure, and must instead be conceived in inextricable conjunction with ostensibly opposing terms, including irony and manipulation" (Kelly 2016, 201).

In this sense, New Sincerity authors have represented everyday reality as inevitably intertwined with fictional discourses, such as political propaganda and advertising. This post-postmodern attitude, based on the assumption that the writer's intentions can always be manipulated (Kelly 2016, 204), informs many contemporary writers' approach to traumatic (hi)stories. Among these, Chabon has explicitly outlined and navigated the ethical problems implied in the representation of the Holocaust, particularly concerning its aftermath and ongoing legacy in the cultural memory of American Jewry. Published for the most part at the turn of the century, Chabon's work is engaged in a cultural revision that aims to move beyond the postmodernist work of deconstruction, towards a process of reconciliation and dialectical revision of the past. Through a series of metafictional strategies that Kelly calls "ethical experiments," the author explores multiple artistic responses to the ethical demand of filling the void left by the European ancestors murdered by the Nazis, while attempting to conciliate the memory of the victims with a present-day sense of Jewish American identity (2016, 203).

1.2. Locating a New Jewish American Literature

Chabon's post-postmodern project of restoring Jewish memory and tradition within the frame of American identity is common to the third generation of Jewish-American writers, which David Sax (2009) has dubbed "the New Yiddishists." Like Chabon, other writers such as Nicole Krauss, Jonathan Safran Foer, Nathan Englander, or Dara Horn, U.S.-born and educated in the last decades of the past century, are connected by their interest in articulating their hyphenated identities, in a move of "reverse assimilation" from

the mainstream North American culture. Aware of the difficulties of bridging the gap with the tradition of their European-born ancestors, they have attempted to reconstruct the past by relying on postmodern and experimental techniques (see e.g. Sax 2009; O'Brien and Witcombe 2018).

In order to excavate and reconstruct the Jewish past from an American perspective, Chabon first locates the site where both cultural traditions intersect in the practice of creativity and fantasy, particularly in writing. On the one hand, writing, particularly narrative, represents the basis of the Jewish cultural tradition. As historian Simon Schama has argued, the devotion of the Jewish people to writing responds to the creation of a collective narrative that helps them survive throughout a long history of genocide and exile (Guimón 2015). Further, Ruth R. Wisse points out that the Jewish intellectual and storytelling tradition is intimately connected with the community's political engagement: "A people that intends to participate meaningfully in the world would first have to know itself and be able to represent itself through a creative cultural continuum" (2000, 4). Such a vast written legacy has provided Jews with a source of inspiration for the questioning and renegotiation of their communal identity.

On the other hand, Chabon has reflected on his own identity as a third-generation Jewish American through a particular approach to fiction writing. For him, there exists a close relationship between his feeling of cultural dislocation and his decision to adopt the conventions of genre fiction. As he has explained explains, his use of generic forms, ranging from fantasy, adventure, or detective narratives, responds to a great extent to his own experience as a modern Jew, constantly "longing for a home that feels irretrievable," a remote birthplace that he sets in "lands that can be found only in imagination" (2008, 175).

Despite the widespread disagreement regarding this market-based differentiation (see e.g. Edmonson 2014), the label "genre fiction," as opposed to scholarly or high-brow fiction, is based on a recurrence of specific plotlines and elements meant to satisfy the low-brow reader's demands for mystery and emotion. Importantly for my thesis on Chabon's engagement in the politics and aesthetics

of Jewish American literature, I argue that genre fiction, with its formulae based on recalling old myths while addressing new masses, provides a meeting point for the Jewish and American traditions.

As Alfred Kazin observed already in the 1960s, the Jewish community has had a rather noticeable presence in American popular culture since the beginning of the 20th century (1966, 405). According to Kazin, their alliance to the national entertainment scene, from the vaudeville and the music hall theatre to the stand-up comedy, including the comic book industry, accounts for their willingness to voice their own story in a country in which they were still another minority in America (1966, 405). Likewise, Chabon finds in this minority consciousness of popular art a meeting point between Jewish and American cultures through the ideal of democracy: "Maybe that strangeness is a universal condition among Americans, if not in fact a prerequisite for citizenship" (2008, 159).

Throughout the analysis that follows, I examine how *Kavalier and Clay* reflects on art, fiction, and fantasy as practices allowing for different forms of escaping and transforming reality. In the first section, I look at Chabon's particular use of metafictional devices throughout the novel, to represent Joe and Sammy's immersive acts of reading, drawing, writing and experiencing reality throughout their own stories. I argue that the novel's representation of the bi-directional passage from reality to fiction and vice-versa maintains the ambivalence regarding the protagonists' agency as both avid consumers and prolific creators of a new American myth. In the second section, I interrogate the ethics implied in the protagonists' acts of "escapism" through fiction, particularly those informed by discourses of American supremacy and war-like heroism. Finally, I look at how the novel advocates for fiction as a space for personal and collective transformation, allowing the protagonists to question essentialist notions of identity and home.

2. Chabon's Metafictional Apparatus

2.1. Uses of Metafiction in *Kavalier and Clay*

The quintessential device of postmodern literature, Metafiction often works to evidence the fictionality of a story by means of what Patricia Waugh has called "obvious framing devices" (1984, 30), strategies that highlight the presence of those frames that explicitly delimit the ontological realms of the real and the fictional. Waugh has coined the notion "frame-breaks," to refer to explicit references to the novel's fictional constructions that reveal an unbridgeable gap between reality and fiction and "forc[e] to recall that our 'real' world can never be the 'real' world of the novel" (1984, 33). As Waugh argues, in suggesting the dissolution of the classic boundaries between reality and fiction, the author warns readers that humans' experience of reality also responds to preexisting narrative constructions based on dominant sociocultural notions (1984, 31). Under this premise, postmodern writers have traditionally used metafiction to interrogate the prevalence of dominant narratives and discourse in the practices and conventions that inform our everyday lives.

As Kelly argues, New Sincerity writers adopt postmodern techniques in order to emphasize the impossibility to separate reality from fiction in contemporary post-capitalist culture, often adopting ambivalent attitudes regarding the ethical agency of readers and authors. In this sense, Chabon's reworking of genre fiction interrogates the divisive, supremacist discourses so often mobilized by American popular culture, but it also explores the possibilities for alternative, more ethical uses of narratives. Thus, in *Kavalier and Clay*, he employs metafictional strategies in order to explore the presence of myths and fiction in 20th-century American life, but also the possibilities for agency and ethical action, that fiction and art enable. Since the protagonists of *Kavalier and Clay* are readers and authors, frame-breaks in the novel operate on two levels: the diegetic and the intradiegetic.

On the one hand, at a diegetic level, the novel engages the reader in the playful logic of what Linda Hutcheon has called

"historiographic metafiction," based on the intertwining of two discourses, a realistic historical one that asserts the novel's historical referentiality by mentioning real characters and events; and a (meta)fictional one that exposes such history as yet another story. Hutcheon introduced and theorized this notion to illustrate a new postmodernist tradition of historical novels published between the 1960s and the 1980s and displaying "a theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs [that]" thus "[making] the grounds for [a] rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past" (1988, 5). In this vein, *Kavalier and Clay* interrogates the alleged factuality of the historical novel by introducing the figure of an editor whose interventions are occasionally registered in the form of footnotes accounting for fictional events and characters or citing invented sources.

In addition, other textual documents are included, directly transcribed, and presented to the reader as unmediated accounts of the reality of the protagonists' lives: this is the case of the last letter, full of black blotches, that Joe receives from his mother and he never opens (Chabon 2000, 322-23), or the record of Sammy's declaration at court, accused of promoting homosexuality in his comics (614-15). The fact that these elements stand in between the openly fictional world of the characters and the assumed reality outside the narrative is part of the novel's metafictional game. The contrast between the mock editor's authoritative tone and the fictionality of his narration leads readers to call into question the historical validity of those accounts that they have so far identified as real, and in turn, open up to a more empathetic approach to the past that recognizes the intimate lives of fictional characters.

On the other hand, at an intradiegetic level, the limits between the world where the protagonists live and the one that they imagine are also blurred. This is what happens when the two protagonists first envision and, presumably, create their comic book hero, the Escapist. Opening without any initial indication of its subordination to the main action, the embedded story closes with a reference to its authors, vaguely but recognizably outlined, walking on the streets of the fiction town where their characters live:

> The sound of their raised voices carries up through the complicated antique ductwork of the grand old theater, rising and echoing through the pipes until it emerges through a grate in the sidewalk, where it can be heard clearly by a couple of young men who are walking past, their collars raised against the cold October night, dreaming their elaborate dream, wishing their wish, teasing their golem into life. (Chabon 2000, 134)

Chabon's intradiegetic frame-breaks also introduce actions taking place in the characters' world as if they belonged to a fictional comic-book realm, such as the frustrated attack of pro-Nazi journalist Carl Ebling (Chabon, 328-32). Following the conventions of the popular genre, Ebling is presented as a murderous villain called "the Saboteur," whom the reader soon identifies with the fictional alter ego of the character. At a certain point, the narration reveals itself as Ebling's own counter-fantasy of heroism, which he plans to put into practice in real life: "When he arrived at work, it was with the intention of showing Joe Kavalier that while Carl Henry Ebling may be a shiftless bumbler and pamphleteer, the Saboteur is not one to be trifled with" (Chabon, 331).

Both these episodes give proof of the instability of the notion of historical truth when it comes filtered through the author's active imagination. Through the introduction of major frame-breaks at both levels of the diegesis, the novel subscribes to a basic postmodernist concern, which Susana Onega has identified as "the advisability of seeing the everyday reality as a construct similar to that of fiction, and as such, similarly 'written' and 'writable'" (1989, 75). On this basis, the novel explores the possibilities of fiction to question and potentially transform one's relation with the narratives that inform our everyday reality. Not only does Chabon destabilize the readers' expectation of historical veracity and objectivity in his portrait of 1930s America, but he also presents us with two protagonists who, switching the roles of readers and authors, mobilize different forms of narrative in order to make sense of and cope with trauma and ordinary violence.

2.2. Fiction as a Response to Reality

The importance of fiction as a mediator in the two protagonists' approach to reality is emphasized in their characterization. In both cases, the reality conveyed through their focalization is filtered by a distinct cultural background, captured in a number of myths, and (hi)stories. Joe's romantic, mythical imagination is shaped by the legend of the Golem of Prague and the famous feats of Harry Houdini. In the same way, Sammy's vast recollection of American pulp mythologies, like the extraordinary circus stories provided by his erratic father, shape his magnifying and self-parodic genius from an early age. Importantly, fiction and fantasy have a therapeutic function for both heroes, helping Joe cope with the fear and uncertainty of a life in exile, and showing Sammy a safe space where he can thrive despite the isolation that he experiences as a working-class, physically non-normative male.

Most notably, the influence of fantasy is reflected in the protagonists' respective responses to reality as creators. On the one hand, Joe embraces the illusion that his authorial battles against the Nazis can have a real effect in reality:

> His ears still ringing with artillery shells, screaming rockets […] He had been drawing, painting, smoking cigarettes, and nothing else for much of the past seven days […] It was six o'clock on a Monday morning in October 1940. He had just won the Second World War, and he was feeling pretty good about it. (Chabon 2000, 165)

Joe's unconscious, life-or-death involvement in his own fantasy mirrors Sammy's intense interaction with his own late work, which translates into a personal reaction against the disillusionment and frustration of adult life:

> He was a furious, even romantic, typist, prone to crescendos, diminuendos, dense and barbed arpeggios […] He had reduced two typewriters to molten piles of slag iron and springs since his return to comics, and when he went to bed at night his mind remained robotically engaged in its labor while he slept, so that his dreams were often laid out in panels. (Chabon 2000, 486)

Both these episodes show the act of creativity, in particular the "writing" of fantasy, as a necessary response to a particular anxiety

related to the condition of dislocation. This idea is symbolized by the figure of Houdini who, as a Jewish artist living in the United States, embodies the romantic sensibility that the cousins share. Houdini is Joe's main referent during his personal and artistic development, particularly when he must cope with the reality of exile and estrangement. Likewise, Sammy relates to Houdini in his ambitious nature as a young man and the consciousness of his own difference: "his dreams had always been Houdiniesque: they were the dreams of a pupa struggling in its blind cocoon, mad for a taste of light and air. Houdini was a hero to little men, city boys, and Jews; Samuel Louis Klayman was all three" (Chabon 2000, 3). Significantly, Houdini stands behind the protagonists' personal and creative partnership, as explained at the novel's opening:

> IN LATER YEARS, holding forth to an interviewer or to an audience of aging fans at a comic book convention, Sam Clay liked to declare, apropos of his and Joe Kavalier's greatest creation [the Escapist], that back when he was a boy, sealed and hog-tied inside the airtight vessel known as Brooklyn, New York, he had been haunted by dreams of Harry Houdini. (Chabon 2000, 3)

In pointing to the connection between displacement and creative urgency, the novel places emphasis on the individual's capacity to reimagine reality through narrative (Robbins 2009, 95).

3. The Ethics of Living through Fiction

3.1. Escapism and the Traps of Superhero Narratives

Well through the first half of the novel, the ethical problems of escapist fiction are outlined through Joe's alternating feelings of confidence and satisfaction towards his work and immediate success, in contrast to his impotence towards the escalating violence of the Nazi regime, and his guilt for having left his family behind: "The surge of triumph he felt when he finished a story was always fleeting, and seemed to grow briefer with every job. […] The Escapist was an impossible champion, ludicrous and above all *imaginary*, fighting a war that could never be won" (Chabon 2000, 168, emphasis in the original). Through this sentence, the novel

points out the futility of any attempt to apply the parameters of fiction to effect any change in real life. As a result, Joe's sense of creative agency as he fights "the funny book war" turns out to be a form of self-conscious deception.

Yet the moment that most clearly stages the ethical dangers of embracing the ethos of popular fiction is when, having joined the army after learning about his younger brother's death, he is sent to an Antarctic base where, still in search of revenge, Joe kills a German civilian in cold blood. Right after realizing that the man is dead, he immediately experiences a sense of loss that surpasses that of the deaths of his loved ones:

> Nothing that had ever happened to him, not […] the death of his father, or internment of his mother and grandfather, not even the drowning of his beloved brother, had ever broken his heart quite as terribly as the realization […] that he was hauling a corpse behind him. (Chabon 2000, 465)

Aiming to escape reality and his responsibility in it, Joe chooses to embody the narrative of the American hero, along with the sociopolitical apparatus that partly informs it. In so doing, he envisions his life as a war hero in search for revenge against a dehumanized German enemy.

The aftermath of the killing, in which Joe experiences the loss of the "enemy" as his own, expresses the former's realization of the traps of popular "escapist" fiction, insofar as it is mobilized towards a supremacist and war-oriented political agenda. The novel's cruel irony towards the American hero narrative is emphasized when, after Joe is rescued by the Allies, he is hailed as a hero for "his claim to have killed the *lone enemy* occupant of a German Antarctic base" (Chabon 2000, 467, emphasis added). In this sense, despite his fantasies of fighting the Nazi evil as an author, Joe ultimately fails to rescue his family, and his testosterone-infused project to embody the American (war) hero ideal only leads him to self-isolation and arbitrary violence. Similarly, no matter how long Sammy tries to escape society's stigma and repression as Jewish and homosexual, as both a reader and a successful author of popular fiction, he is trapped in a cycle of shame, and self-denial.

In sum, the novel interrogates the totalizing narratives often conveyed by popular fiction by showing the self-deception and the tragic consequences implied in performing and ultimately living up to the standards of a superhero in the real world. Chabon underlines how the violence and injustice experienced by the protagonists are also perpetuated by political propaganda, such as the Nazi propaganda that Ebling collects and circulates (Chabon 2000, 202-4), or the pastoral documentary about the life of the Jews in the Terezin ghetto that distorts and denies the Nazi genocide (Chabon 2000, 442-43). Likewise, comic books and other popular culture products may also be mobilized as vehicles for dominant narratives of heroism and national pride. However, the novel insists that fiction can –and must– exceed the aims of political propaganda, and undo the hierarchies that threaten human relationships across cultural and political borders.

3.2. The Ethics of Transformation through Fiction(s)

Joe's and Sammy's experiences of displacement, violence and ostracism are not isolated from the cultural and political landscape of the interwar period in which the Golden Era of comic books took place (see e.g. DiPaolo 2011). The fact that both characters are capable of finding refuge and a source of reassurance in popular fiction speaks to a more complex understanding of the latter, beyond its associations with escapism and nationalist propaganda. Fiction in Chabon's work always stands as a complex, polyphonic space that both encompasses and potentially destabilizes dominant discourses, as an example of Mikhail Bakhtin's "heteroglossia," this is, the intrinsic capacity of texts to contain multiple stories and voices in their very structure.

Bakhtin suggests that texts are most often conditioned by dominant socio-historical conditions and "by the task that an ideological discourse assumes" (1981, 270). While this monologic or univocal approach to discourse is "opposed to the realities of heteroglossia," it also acts as a force that inevitably limits the multiple possibilities of voices contained in a text to a few, if not a single, dominant one(s) (1981, 270). According to the critic, all texts, literary or otherwise, are heteroglossic only by virtue of their

existence in a complex network of "dialogic" elements from diverse living languages and socio-semantic strata. However, for its structural complexity, it is the discourse and the form of the novel the one that most clearly illustrates this trait (1981, 263), providing a vast space to appropriate dominant narratives to convey more specific, often marginal experiences.

In this sense, Chabon counters the monologic view of fantasy fiction as an escape route or a lifesaver for the protagonists, instead vindicating art and fiction as forms that, unlike propaganda, allow authors a space to renegotiate their identity and ethically engage with the world. This capacity of fiction to foster openness and (self-)transformation among readers and authors is anticipated by Sammy's reflections on the supernatural powers shared by the cousins' two heroes, Houdini and Superman: "[T]o me, Clark Kent in a phone booth and Houdini in a packing crate […] You weren't the same person when you came out as when you went in. […] It was never just a question of escape. It was also a question of transformation" (Chabon 2000, 3).

This idea of transformation, as opposed to mere escapism, is based on an ethical and political engagement with fiction, which informs the final development of the protagonists' lives. While Joe realizes that he is both capable and ethically compelled to find a new home and community after the war, Sammy decides to follow his own desires and search for a freer place to pursue his career as a screenwriter and his personal happiness as a gay man.

These two storylines intersect in the cousins' first encounter after the war, over the first draft of Joe's latest work, pointing to fiction's role in enabling an ethical and transformative encounter between authors and readers. Back in New York, and still estranged from his cousin and old girlfriend Rosa Sacks, Joe starts to work obsessively on a new comic book titled *The Golem*, a mythical-historical fiction that recreates ordinary episodes in the lives of the European Jews murdered by the Nazis. Closer to a modern graphic novel, *The Golem* departs from the popular comic book imagery that he had displayed in The Escapist, and through it Joe aims to locate himself in the Jewish tradition and pay homage to the memory of

his people, stigmatized, massacred, and forced into exile for over the centuries (Gasiorek 2012, 887).

Joe's project to imagine and memorialize his fellow European Jews has both a personal and a political dimension. Since the early 1990s, early criticism on trauma literature has advocated art and writing's possibilities for individual healing and collective vindication. Judith Herman has pointed out that speaking out against cultural and collective trauma not only produces immediate relief in front of an audience but also responds against the silencing of a certain community's past and present in the public sphere (1997, 2). Further, Susan Brison advocates for writing's role in providing a sense of continuity and cohesion to the gaps and disruptions that often characterize post-traumatic memory (1999, 48-49). As she argues, writing can help restore the void created by the numbing effects of trauma and allow survivors to continue to project their lives towards the future (1997, 2).

This framework illuminates how in writing *The Golem*, Joe simultaneously addresses both dimensions of his trauma: the loss of his family and home, and his political experience as a European Jewish refugee, exiled from a cultural and ethnic territory that no longer exists. It is after having rescued the memory of his people that he can accomplish his transformation by recognizing that he can construct a new homeland in America. After he finishes his new work, Joe visits Houdini's grave in the Machpelah Jewish cemetery. There he has a vision of his magic teacher Bernard Kornblum, dead in the Shoah, in which the latter advises Joe to "[f]or God's sake […] Go home" (Chabon 2000, 608). In this significant episode, fantasy, tradition, and the supernatural reveal themselves as transformative forces enabling Joe to remember his past, in other to rethink his home for the future. This future home, as he already knows, is in New York, along with his cousin, his still beloved Rosa, and the son born soon after he left.

The transformative effect of fiction is also manifested in its capacity to provide ethical paths for mutual understanding. After reading Joe's *The Golem* after his reunion with his cousin, Sammy eventually reckons with his own escapist approach to life as expressed in his writing as well as his long-time exhausted literary

ambitions, which he had expressed for years in his unfinished autobiographic novel titled *American Disillusionment*:

> ‘A comic book novel,’ Sammy said. He thought of his own by-now legendary novel, *American Disillusionment*. […] It had been two years now since his last crack at the thing, and until this very instant he would have sworn that his ancient ambitions to be something more than the hack scribbler of comic books for a fifth-rate house were as dead, as the saying went, as vaudeville. (Chabon 2000, 543)

Sammy’s realization of the loss of his literary and personal ambitions after reading Joe’s great *oeuvre* reasserts literature as an ethical vehicle for self-identification and mutual understanding. It is in this episode that Sammy opens up about his homosexuality to Joe and admits the fact that, after many years of escaping his own personal desires, he also needs to transform at that point in his life.

A direct victim of postwar America’s homophobia, Sammy spends most of his adult life hiding while expressing his homoerotic desires through his superhero-sidekick plots. This form of autobiographic escapism fails to go unnoticed by the government committee that calls him to declare, under a homophobic panic against comic books. Having repeatedly lied about his condition, his encounter with himself Joe’s late work encourages him to move to Los Angeles and start working as a TV scriptwriter. Although the cinematic character of this city may suggest Sammy’s need to keep playing a role, his decision to move follows his search for a new “homeland” in accord with his true identity. Further, his choice of Los Angeles also implies a redefinition of his roots in adapting his art to new channels of popular culture. In its constant exploration of the possibilities of realism and fantasy to represent the protagonists’ plights, the novel shows that the truth depends on the individuals’ capacity to understand their position in the world and in history. Over and above, transformation means embracing the idea of alterity by adopting narrative and art as sites of self-discovery and interpersonal connection.

4. Conclusion

In this essay, I have approached *Kavalier and Clay* as a case of contemporary fiction that attempts to bridge the gap between the Jewish past and present, but also between the European and American cultures and literary traditions. As I have suggested at the beginning, following Kelly's study of the New Sincerity writing, Chabon approaches these tasks as a sort of ethical experiment, knowing that, in choosing to focus on a particular side of history, he will probably escape certain responsibilities in leaving another at the side. In this sense, the author consciously departs from a realistic Holocaust narrative to explore the experiences of exile and displacement through the stories of Joe and Sammy, a European survivor in exile, and a first-generation American Jew respectively. In so doing, he explores the development of Jewish American identity, whose nucleus he has formerly located in the practice of creativity and fiction, and in particular in popular culture and fantasy.

In narrating how the protagonists work together to create the successful comic book, *The Escapist*, Chabon reaffirms the importance of creativity in the construction of Jewish American identity, embodied by the figure of Harry Houdini, a Jewish exile in America and a hero for both protagonists. However, working on *The Escapist* and living up to its immediate success and cultural relevance comes at a high price for both protagonists. As I have argued, this is particularly the case of Joe, who often finds himself guilty in his frustrated attempts to rescue his family back in Europe, and channels these anxieties by embodying a black-and-white narrative of American heroism that eventually leads him to pursue "justice" through extreme violence.

Ultimately, the novel acknowledges the clear-cut limits between fiction and reality, and the problems of "escapism" insofar as it is understood as a drift from ethical responsibility. In so doing, it advocates fiction's heteroglossic character and concedes that it can also have a "transformative," allowing both readers and writers to mediate with their own notions of culture and identity, and ultimately find creative and ethical ways to survive and thrive through structural conditions of oppression. As Chabon implies, this

final development is possible through an ethical encounter between both heroes, simultaneously characters, readers, and authors of a story in a constant move of exile and regeneration, a cycle that illustrates the Jewish American experience.

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