

**AUTOBIOGRAPHIES: PSYCHOANALYSIS AND
THE GRAPHIC NOVEL**

PARASKEVI LYKOU

PHD

THE UNIVERSITY OF YORK

**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND RELATED
LITERATURE**

JANUARY 2014

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the conjunction of the graphic novel with life-writing using psychoanalytic concepts, primarily Freudian and post-Freudian psychoanalysis, to show how the graphic medium is used to produce a narrative which reconstructs the function of the unconscious through language. The visual language is rich in meaning, with high representational potential which results in a vivid representation of the unconscious, a more or less raw depiction of the function of the psychoanalytic principles. In this project I research how life-writing utilises the unique representational features of the medium to uncover dimensions of the internal-self, the unconscious and the psyche. I use the tools and principles of psychoanalysis as this has been formed from Freud on and through the modern era, to propose that the visual language of the graphic medium renders the unconscious more accessible presenting the unconscious functionality in a uniquely transparent way, so that to some extent we can see parts of the process of the construction of self identity. The key texts comprise a sample of internationally published, contemporary autobiographical and biographical accounts presented in the form of the graphic novel. The major criterion for including each of the novels in my thesis is that they all are, in one way or another, stories of growing up stigmatised by a significant trauma, caused by the immediate familial and/or social environment. Thus they all are examples of individuals incorporating the trauma in order to overcome it, and all are narrations of constructing a personal identity through and because of this procedure. The presentation of the characters' childhood is a (re)construction of their family history and an emergence of their own sense of the self, as this sense has been defined in the late modernity.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract	2
List of Illustrations	4
PREFACE	
On Freud and the Freudians	6
Acknowledgments	12
Declaration	13
INTRODUCTION	14
CHAPTER ONE	
Constructions in Psychoanalysis; Why Autobiography?	
ii. Versions of Self	20
iii. Reality and boundaries	26
iv. Autobiography: Theorising the Self	31
CHAPTER TWO	
<i>Maus</i> : Managing the Transgenerational Trauma	38
CHAPTER THREE	
<i>Epileptic</i> : A Visual Pathography	70
CHAPTER FOUR	
<i>Blankets</i> : Religiously and Socially Constructed Constraints	104
CHAPTER FIVE	
<i>Persepolis</i> : The Ever Foreign	139
CHAPTER SIX	
<i>Fun Home</i> : Familial and Internal Conflict	168
CONCLUSION	198
Bibliography	209

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

	Page
PLATE 1.1: <i>Ethel & Ernest</i>, pp. 34-35	18
PLATE 2.1: <i>The Complete Maus</i>, p. 34	47
PLATE 2.2: <i>The Complete Maus</i>, p. 35	49
PLATE 2.3: <i>The Complete Maus</i>, p. 165	51
PLATE 2.4: <i>The Complete Maus</i>, p. 201	54
PLATE 2.5: <i>The Complete Maus</i>, p. 296	59
PLATE 2.6: <i>The Complete Maus</i>, p. 230	60
PLATE 2.7: <i>The Complete Maus</i>, p. 231 (detail)	63
PLATE 2.8: <i>The Complete Maus</i>, pp. 274-275	66
PLATE 3.1: <i>Epileptic</i>, p.1	76
PLATE 3.2: <i>Epileptic</i>, p. 4 (detail)	78
PLATE 3.3: <i>Epileptic</i>, p. 8 (detail)	79
PLATE 3.4: <i>Epileptic</i>, p. 8 (detail)	81
PLATE 3.5: <i>Epileptic</i>, p. 16	84
PLATE 3.6: <i>Epileptic</i>, p. 40	87
PLATE 3.7: <i>Epileptic</i>, pp. 83-84	92
PLATE 3.8: <i>Epileptic</i>, p. 275	94
PLATE 3.9: <i>Epileptic</i>, p. 18	97
PLATE 3.10: <i>Epileptic</i>, pp. 151-152	100
PLATE 3.11: <i>Epileptic</i>, p. 302	101
PLATE 4.1: <i>Blankets</i>, pp. 15-16	105
PLATE 4.2: <i>Blankets</i>, p. 29	110
PLATE 4.3: <i>Blankets</i>, p. 31	111
PLATE 4.4: <i>Blankets</i>, pp. 51-52	114
PLATE 4.5: <i>Blankets</i>, pp. 59-60	115

PLATE 4.6: <i>Blankets</i>, p. 91	120
PLATE 4.7: <i>Blankets</i>, pp. 145-146	125
PLATE 4.8: <i>Blankets</i>, p. 312	127
PLATE 4.9: <i>Blankets</i>, pp. 581-582	137
PLATE 5.1: <i>Persepolis</i>, p. 3	147
PLATE 5.2: <i>Persepolis</i>, p. 103	150
PLATE 5.3: <i>Persepolis</i>, p. 104	151
PLATE 5.4: <i>Persepolis</i>, p. 40	154
PLATE 5.5: <i>Persepolis</i>, p. 42	155
PLATE 5.6: <i>Persepolis</i>, p. 51	159
PLATE 5.7: <i>Persepolis</i>, p. 52 (detail)	160
PLATE 5.8: <i>Persepolis</i>, p. 153	163
PLATE 6.1: <i>Fun Home</i>, p. 1	175
PLATE 6.2: <i>Fun Home</i>, p. 27	176
PLATE 6.3: <i>Are You My Mother?</i>, p. 95 (detail)	181
PLATE 6.4: <i>Are You My Mother?</i>, p. 96 (detail)	182
PLATE 6.5: <i>Fun Home</i>, p. 44	186
PLATE 6.6: <i>Fun Home</i>, pp. 123-124	187
PLATE 6.7: <i>Fun Home</i>, p. 125 (detail)	189
PLATE 6.8: <i>Are You My Mother?</i>, pp. 32-33	196
PLATE C.1: <i>Asterios Polyp</i>, pp. 6-7	202
PLATE C.2: <i>Asterios Polyp</i>, pp. 14-15	203
PLATE C.3: <i>Asterios Polyp</i>, pp. 44-45	204
PLATE C.4: <i>Asterios Polyp</i>, pp. 57-58	206

PREFACE

On Freud and the Freudians

The *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, translated by James and Alix Strachey who have been members of the Bloomsbury Group (particularly active in the first half of the 20th century) and the Psychoanalytic society (which started in the early 1900s in Freud's house to expand to an international psychoanalytic movement within a couple of decades), is a work generally acclaimed and is regarded as a quite magnificent achievement, a work that introduced formally and determinatively psychoanalysis to the world and defined its future in the western, Anglophone world. Translations prior to the Stracheys (e.g. A. A. Brill's attempts) had been insufficient, 'casual and at times fearfully inaccurate',¹ so the new translation, of which Freud and Ernest Jones were aware, proved to be 'a momentous event in the diffusion of psychoanalytic ideas: the set of papers quickly established itself as the standard text for analysts unlettered in German'.² But this momentous work did not come without some flaws. The main problem as understood by many theorists (from Bettelheim to Lacan and a number of post-Freudians) was what Zaretsky compendiously defines as "the drive towards medicalization":

One casualty was Freud's use of everyday language. Freud used the term *Ich*, "I", to refer to both psychic structure *and* the experience self, thus giving it a double meaning. Strachey's translation of *Ich* as "ego" eliminated this duality. Strachey's preference for classicized terms, itself a medical bias, deepened the problem. "Good" became "appropriate", "need" became "exigency", "at rest" became "in a state of quiescence". Affect-laden, active, and dynamic constructions gave way to neutral, passive, and static ones. Freud's present tense, often

¹ Peter Gay, *Freud: A Life for Our Times* (London: J.M. Dent, 1988). p. 465.

² *Ibid.* p. 466.

integral to his effort to capture the timelessness of the unconscious, was replaced with the simple past. The adoption of a standardized glossary underlined Anglo-American dominance over analysis. To this day, the Strachey translation remains the international standard.³

The above paragraph describes the impression I formed reading Freud in English for the first time after having experienced reading most of his work from a Greek translation, and it can constitute the starting point for an argument about the development of psychoanalysis in the Anglo-Saxon world. Furthermore, the 1982 monograph by Bruno Bettelheim, on *Freud and Man's Soul*, a fierce argument against the Strachey translation, brings forth even more considerations on the matter. Bettelheim's essay is a critique of the standardisation of the *Standard Edition*, pointing out in illuminating detail all the aspects of the translation that have created a different understanding of Freud and psychoanalysis, than the one perceived by the German reader (and consequently the one Freud himself was intending). Bettelheim starts off apologetically, trying to prove that his understanding of not only the German language and psychoanalysis, but Freud himself is sufficient to allow him to pursue the polemics that are to follow: 'As a child born into a middle-class, assimilated Jewish family in Vienna, I was raised and educated in an environment that was in many respects identical with the one that had formed Freud's background'.⁴ His account is rather sentimental, exasperated, at times furious; possibly with the translators, but maybe merely with the turn of events. He argues far and long, with strong language and persistence, in an account that to an English speaker who did not have the experience of reading Freud in German or in a different translation may seem overly emotional and without credit. For me, drawing from my experience, his account is transparent and justified, fulfilling his initial goal which was to 'correct the mistranslations of some of the most important psychoanalytic concepts; and to show how deeply humane a person Freud was, that he was a humanist in the best sense of the

³ Eli Zaretsky, *Secrets of the Soul : A Social and Cultural History of Psychoanalysis*, Repr. 2004 ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 2005). p. 295.

⁴ Bruno Bettelheim, *Freud and Man's Soul* (N.Y.: Knopf, 1983). p. 3.

world'.⁵ Bettelheim debates the supposedly scientific status of psychoanalysis – or the possibility of a “human science” that does not follow the model of the natural sciences. His position on this debate is firmly towards seeing and presenting Freud as a Humanist.

Bettelheim’s conviction that ‘the translators’ clumsy substitutions and inexact use of language are all the more damaging to his ideas’,⁶ is something that I have had to deal with extensively during this thesis, and without claiming that my interlinguistic experience lends me some higher knowledge, it is true that frequently my understanding of Freud and the understanding of my peers (tutors and fellow students alike) was largely conflictive. I now have reasonable doubts that I would have been able to carry out this thesis in its current form, if the only texts available were from Strachey’s *Standard Edition*.

Incidentally, in the early 2000s, taking advantage of the prospective expiration of the copyright of the original translation, Penguin Editions undertook a new, literary translation of the Freudian canon to be presented in sixteen volumes, under the editorial supervision of British psychoanalyst and writer, Adam Phillips. His editorial approach has raised some concern, considered by many as unorthodox. Phillips’s point of view, though it may seem extreme, draws from the widely stated concerns of the people who see Strachey’s translation as damaging to the psychoanalytic movement. Phillips’s own controversial position is this:

I think a literary translation will capture some of what has been lost in Freud: an unconscious and a conscious ambiguity in the writing, and an interest in sentences, in the fact that language is evocative as well as informative.⁷

Since this announcement, and with the publication of the first Penguin Freud books there has been criticism, particularly about the fact that there is no consensus across the publication of the so-called “Freudian terms”, and each translator has been allowed to translate standard Freudian vocabulary at will. I

⁵ Ibid. p. xi.

⁶ Ibid. p. 9.

⁷ Robert S. Boynton, "The Other Freud (the Wild One); New Translation Aims to Free the Master from His Disciples' Obsessions," *New York Times*, 10 June 2000.

recognise that this can be a problem, in terms of continuity, but I believe it is the price we are called to pay in order to have at hand an edition closer to the original spirit of psychoanalysis (as Bettelheim points out: ‘In the Vienna of Freud’s time [presumably Bettelheim refers to the Vienna of his own time, coinciding with Freud’s, in the 1920s and 1930s] , psychology was not a natural science but a branch of philosophy; it was mainly speculative and descriptive, and was essentially humanistic in content’⁸).

A *Note on the Texts* in *The Penguin Freud Reader* states that:

[T]he reader of this new *Penguin Freud Reader* will find no house-style Freud; and unlike those who have the misfortune to be able to read Freud only in the original, the reader will find here a more various Freud, less consistent in idiom and terminology than even Freud himself was able to be.⁹

This rather cryptic sentence is commented upon by Michael Wood of *The London Review of Books* as such: “‘Was able’ is a very nice touch. Freud was doing what he could to be muddled, but couldn’t go all the way’.¹⁰ If I am a more fortunate reader, who had the opportunity to read Freud in at least three versions except for the original, I can attest that this supposedly more literary approach of the Penguin edition is much closer to the painstakingly translated – with attention and persistence to terminology and the consistency of the Freudian language– Greek version which I studied in my early days in academia, than the more detached approach of the Stracheys.

Therefore, throughout this thesis I have consciously made the choice to avoid using the Strachey translation, whenever this was possible (using the Penguin edition when available as well as –occasionally– the Peter Gay, Vintage edition *Freud Reader*). The Freud of Strachey could not convey the variety of concepts I have been using, and it could not support the gravity of

⁸ Bettelheim, *Freud and Man's Soul*. p. 37.

⁹ Sigmund Freud and Adam Phillips, *The Penguin Freud Reader* (London: Penguin, 2005). p. xvii

¹⁰ Michael Wood, "There Is No Cure," *London Review of Books* 28, no. 13 (2006). Available from <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v28/n13/michael-wood/there-is-no-cure> [Accessed 19 November 2013].

my work. It would have been difficult and awkward for me to work in the unfamiliar environment of a more clinical Freud who lacks to a large extent his empathic, warm and humorous qualities. Because I do recognise the terminology problems that occur, I have tried to remain faithful to the classical, the “standard” vocabulary whenever possible in favour of understanding, but I do believe that further precision or persistence on this would not have much to offer to the specifics of my work, other than restrain it and nail it in a very narrow field. As Phillips writes, defending his choice to avoid consistent terminology:

The avoidance of analysts, I hoped, might mean that the people involved would not be hung up on what is still called psychoanalytic politics, and would not be overly mindful of what people within the profession would think of as the issues, especially of terminology. People within psychoanalytic groups, unsurprisingly, have a very strong transference, both negative and positive, so to speak, to Freud’s texts; I wanted people who were not quite so embroiled, or who were embroiled in other things. And I wanted them to be people who were used to reading and interpreting texts, not to just learning and using them as instruction manuals. I thought the project would only have life in it if the editor got pleasure out of it.¹¹

My work here is not medical or clinical, my thesis is a piece of literary criticism, and as such is allowed the liberty of choosing the resources which will better support the ideas I am expressing and the argument I am trying to construct. Of course this does not indicate a sacrifice of the conceptual clarity and consistency that is essential for an academic essay.

In the course of the thesis, I have been using Freud, Freudians and post-Freudians, in an attempt to examine the Unconscious mind, the creative process, the management of crippling trauma and the subsequent construction of strong identities. My choice of authors and scholars is related to the specifics

¹¹ Adam Phillips, "After Strachey," *London Review of Books* 29, no. 19 (2007). Available from <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v29/n19/adam-phillips/after-strachey> [Accessed 19 November 2013].

of each of the key texts I am examining, and not to the collaborative or conflictive relationship these authors had with Freud and with each other. In terms of psychoanalysis as a treatment, there are a number of different approaches, which all do matter when the therapist has to deal with real patients. Every method is not appropriate for every patient. The conflicts that have occurred in the psychoanalytic community almost immediately after Freud took it out to the public domain, even though they frequently seem to have the attributes of a religious war, are to some extent justified by different analytic experiences, and the realisation that different patients need a different therapeutic approach which is not always this of the orthodox Freudian analysis. All of these approaches however which today comprise the texts of psychoanalysis, are items of knowledge regarding the functionality of the human psyche. This is why I chose not to question the medical validity of the different schools I use, but to understand all of them as parts of the important knowledge that is psychoanalysis. Despite their enmities, what they cannot shake off (and their enmities could well be *because* of this) is the fact that they all come as a consequence of the intellectual construction of Sigmund Freud. Every time a theory can illuminate a dark corner of the human perception, can enlighten a bizarre or non-expected behaviour (even if it is an artistic behaviour) there is a gain for the humanities, an extension of the already known and an expansion of the corpus of human knowledge.

When I met Adam Phillips I asked if in his opinion it was worth pursuing a research project on Freud, besides the objections (almost sneers) of a number of people insisting that Freud was “outdated”, “old-fashioned” and “dead for the academia”. He told me the same thing with which he opens his defence of the translation of Freud in *The London Review of Books* (almost word for word): ‘This is certainly a good time for psychoanalysis: because it is so widely discredited, because there is no prestige, or glamour, or money in it, only those who are really interested will go into it. And now that Freud’s words are so casually dismissed, a better, more eloquent case needs to be made for the value of his writing’.¹² In this thesis I have tried to do exactly this, not from the point of translation, but from the point of research.

¹² Ibid.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my appreciation and gratitude to my supervisor, Mr. Geoffrey Wall, for his dedication to my project and the ongoing support and mentoring. He believed in me more than I believed to myself, and this has fuelled my efforts throughout all these years. I would also like to thank my Thesis Advisory Panel members, Professor Hugh Haughton and Professor Bill Sherman for their useful contributions and their valuable input during my research. I would like to offer my special thanks to Associate Professor Yannis Skarpelos for being ever-present, inspiring and offering moral support whenever needed. I couldn't neglect to thank Professors Yangos Andreadis and Dimitris Dimiroulis as well as Associate Professors Nikos Bakounakis and Dionisis Kavathas for their involvement with the pragmatics of my decision to move to the UK and continue my studies abroad; their support has been essential.

I am deeply grateful to my counsellor, Alison Watson for her constant encouragement and dedication through the most difficult period of my studies; her reassuring presence had a tremendously positive impact on the continuation of my research.

I am indebted to my dear friend Dr. Elena Anastasaki, for her useful feedback and overall encouragement and support, as well as Associate Professor Ephie Fountoulaki for receiving me with true care and love, and offering me her friendship and illuminating narrations on life and academia.

I am indeed grateful to all of my friends for having been there throughout this period, but I am particularly obliged to Andy and Helen Munzer as well as my supportive housemates Matt Wilkinson, Kate Milburn and Simone Dölfel. I deeply appreciate the feedback offered by Antigoni Efstratoglou and Mary Staikou.

Last but not least, I need to thank my family: my parents Evangelos and Eleftheria Lykou, my loving grandparents Giorgos and Irine Pouli and Giorgos Lykos, and my dedicated godmother Anastasia Pouli and her husband Robert Stadler, for their excessive and persistent financial and moral support without which this adventure could have never started. I also have to thank Leta Spiliopoulou for being always there as a steady and trustworthy friend to whom I can always count on. At the very end I would like express my gratitude to my beloved fiancé, Panos Sakkas, for being there, bearing with me and planning his life along with mine.

DECLARATION

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, this dissertation is the result of my own research and authorship and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of York or any other institution.

As part of my work in progress, material from this thesis has been presented in academic conferences in the UK. Particularly:

Parts of the introduction have been presented as a paper: *Constructions in Psychoanalysis; Why Autobiography?* in “Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society: A postgraduate conference”, at the Centre for Psychoanalysis, Middlesex University, June 2012 and *Psychoanalysis, Comics and the Dream Space* in the conference “Working Through Psychoanalysis” at the University of Leeds, April 2011.

A first draft from chapter three, *Epileptic: A Visual Pathography* has been presented as a conference paper: *Visual Pathography: Graphic Representations of Illness in David B.’s “Epileptic”*, in the “4th Global Conference: Visual Literacies”, at the University of Oxford, July 2010. Later the same year the paper was published in a collection of conference papers under the title *Mapping Minds* (ed. Monika Raesch) from Inter-Disciplinary Press, Witney. However the version appearing here is heavily revised and significantly extended.

Part of the conclusion, and specifically the discussion on *Asterios Polyp* has been presented as a paper: *Staging the Dream-Space on the Comics Page: Elements of Psychoanalysis in a contemporary graphic novel*, in the “Graphic Novels and Comics” conference, at Manchester Metropolitan University, July 2011 and *Representations of Space; Space in Comics*, in the British Association for American Studies “56th Annual Conference”, at the University of Central Lancashire, April 2011.

INTRODUCTION

Comics is a medium that most people will probably come across early in their reading lives. In one form or another it seems to belong in our environment almost naturally, found in newspapers, magazines, books, nowadays extensively on the Internet, but also in advertisements, on information leaflets, serving many different purposes from entertainment to information. Their serial form is an important feature of the medium; comics are traditionally associated with daily papers and weekly or monthly magazine issues. The graphic novel, a relatively new genre within the spectrum of comics, even if presented as a single volume, has its roots in this medium that is characterised by a tendency to continue, to persist, to return again and again until the story is complete; or purposefully avoid ending the story just for the sake of continuity. This serial form is one of the reasons why comics are a fertile medium for autobiographical narrative. When comics are combined with life-writing, the adherence of life to persist through the most difficult situations, the obstinacy of stories to keep being narrated regardless of how painful it may be both for the narrator and the audience, finds its means of expression in a genre that has, historically, proven the tendency to hold firm to its original concepts, sometimes beyond any expectation. A variety of examples can prove this point, from the newspapers comic-strips that have lasted for up to thirty years or more, to the superhero genre, with characters like Batman or Superman lasting since the late 1930s despite much misadventure, even returning from their in-story “deaths”.

I first came across comics when I was still too little to read the letters in the speech balloons, but old enough to understand this was a medium I could – and later would – thoroughly enjoy. I do not have a clear memory of the first time I opened a comic book, I know however that this must have happened in my grandmother’s house, where my rather young (merely a decade older than the three year old me) maternal uncle kept a stash of more or less debatable – certainly less appropriate for my age – comic books. In the course of the next fifteen years I spent a lot of time in this controversial library, getting acquainted with the medium, reading of it and into it, watching stories come

into life in a completely different manner than the prose literature I was reading at the time and different to the cartoons I was watching as a toddler, child, teenager and adult. The process of my reading comics has been enriched by a secret delight, an almost shameful pleasure –many of them were completely inappropriate for a child–, often terror –many of them were violent– and intense questioning –many of them were dealing with serious political, ethical and philosophical issues difficult if not impossible for a pre-school child to grasp. Soon after I learned to read, at the age of six, I claimed my own comics library, becoming a devoted fan of a weekly children’s magazine with Disney character stories. This weekly delight at merely a hundred drachmas (a value of about twenty pence today) soon became a weekly anxiety, as this magazine was being used for pedagogic purposes: forbidden as a punishment, used often as the carrot to make me behave well, and a form of reluctant award when the week had gone by without mishaps. My reading of comics from a young age has, I believe, enriched my perception skills of multiunderstanding, and trained me to distinguish various levels of meaning and multiple layers of expression. At the same time, and same age, I was a voracious prose reader despite the common misconception that comics-reading children are poor prose readers. I always appreciated comics as a unique medium, different to all the others available in the late 1980s, which offered a different kind of pleasure. I never saw comics as a lazier form of reading nor as an easy substitute for literature. I never particularly enjoyed reading simplified, illustrated versions of classic books because I was not after an easy reading out of boredom or haste. Thus my attachment to comics was something else, a lot more interesting and flavoursome, than an easy way out of reading.

Later upon my entrance in university I attended classes related to comics to have a better view of the media and communication theories, semiotics and the narrative potential of comics, which was largely the subject of my first degree. My first serious academic project with comics was my Masters dissertation. I presented then a psychoanalytic approach to Jeff Smith’s *Bone*; I outlined the theory I am setting forth, regarding the medium. In *Graphic Imagery: A Psychoanalytic Approach to Interpreting “Bone”* I suggested the connection between psychoanalysis and comics, tracing and analysing the similarities between Freud’s dream theories and the functionality of the comics medium.

Bone is a fantasy graphic novel, large, imaginative, rich in graphic stimuli and particularly rich in dreams and dream-like phenomena. My argument was that the comics medium is functioning in a way similar to the dream-work as described in *The Interpretation of Dreams* by Freud. This was not very hard to establish, as particular examples proved, and I believe the association between comics and psychoanalysis was valid. During this research project I discussed aspects of visual narrative, and particularly the visual grammar that defines the medium, as well as symbolism and aspects of representation. I state in the conclusion:

While the suggestions and findings of this dissertation were written with Jeff Smith's *Bone* in mind in our analysis, I believe that the findings herein offer a glimpse of the space and potential for widening this analytical framework and associating the conflation of studying the comics medium with an eye to Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* in a wider sense. Perhaps by applying the practice of psychoanalytic literary analysis to comics, we have also intimated towards a literary and discursive depth often overlooked in what is perhaps, both the oldest and youngest, the simplest and most complex of artistic and creative mediums.¹³

This new project has its roots in this early work on the visual. What I am now talking about is the complexity of the visual image as a means of construction and demonstrations of aspects of identity. My material is different to *Bone*; for the purpose of this analysis I am using a variety of contemporary autobiographical graphic novels. As *Bone* was ideal –due to its form and content– to discuss the dreaming, autobiographical texts are useful to the discussion of identity formation since they contain a personal element which can help us find the first traces of the personal investment of the artist into their work. I believe that the suggestions made in this thesis are applicable to the comics medium in general, however it is much easier to locate them in books

¹³ Evita Lykou, "Imagery: A Psychoanalytic Approach to Interpreting "Bone" " (University of York, 2009). Unpublished MA dissertation, p. 63.

that talk –regardless of the pragmatics– about the procedure of building up an identity, while trying to overcome major trauma, which is frequently a defining turning point for the construction of a personal identity. The process of dealing with –let alone narrating– the past is by and of itself an act of construction. In the process of actively visualising this narration through the functionality of the medium, the construction gets more complex and enriched with more material than would be possible in other narrative mediums.

The narrative potential of comics as a medium (its miscellaneousness, heterogeneity, textual-visual composition) allows the artist to explore the narrative spectrum, to make use of a variety of perception tools and wander through existing genres, mixing them, enriching them, recreating them. Comics may use fiction or refer to non-fictional events and people, they can be dramatic and they can be funny, they function like every major narrative medium, while being distinctively different. In this project I have focused on autobiographical graphic novels, because this sub-genre provides a prolific field to find and attest to the elements of the unconscious every author (every artist) employs in order to build a work of art and create something using their own intellect –I would say “soul”, though in a non religious way– and experiences, their perception of the world as the raw material. In autobiography the plasticity of memories (which is at the same time an inflexibility bonding the person who remembers, no matter how inaccurately, to one perception of an event), their unconscious or conscious interpretations are decisive for the end result –that is the comic book.

There is a plethora of works to choose from, in the search for graphic life writing. Literary biographies, memoirs, autobiographies, fictional biographies and autobiographies; the medium is rich in examples. I have chosen to study non-fictional biographies and relevant examples of life writing; however fictional biographies are interesting and useful in that the findings of this research are directly applicable to fictional biographies (structure, the composition of the page and the narrative manner of the story) and from there on to the comics medium in general. The style, the rhythm and the character of each book is different, even when sometimes it is written by the same author. Different psychological highlights result in different interpretations and a different artistic outcome.

The dark, infernal atmosphere of *Maus* is different to the factual narration of *Persepolis*. *Epileptic*'s painful and agonising tempo cannot be compared with *Blanket*'s frequent lyricism. Even between *Fun Home* and *Are You My Mother?*, two books by the same author, the differences are significant. I will study these books in detail in the chapters to follow, however I would like to introduce my subject with a brief reference to Raymond Briggs's *Ethel & Ernest*, a biography of the author's parents (reading more like a second-hand memoir about their loving marriage). The book is shorter than the others mentioned above, and still it spans five decades and important historical changes within its hundred pages.



PLATE I.1: *Ethel & Ernest*, pp. 34-35

The story starts when Ethel, a devoted housemaid notices and gets noticed by the young milkman, in 1928. The pace of the story is fast, it almost leaves you breathless, and the narration is overly complex, comprising not only text and illustration but also changing according to the structure of the content.

The ever-present newspaper read by Ernest gives the pace, reminding the reader that this is not only a story about a married couple, but a story of how the country and the world changed, at the time: socially, politically, economically and technologically. Yet this is presented through the prism of the daily life of the couple.

In Brigg's book, history and memory are woven into the characters; the narration jumps from politics to private matters, within the page, telling not only the story of two people, but the story of a generation and an era (Plate I.1). The book is written in memory of the two parents, but probably also because of the memory that defined them and made them who they have been for their son.

What difference does it make that this book is written in the comics form rather than as a prose memoir? The medium is important, because expressive tools of each medium differ and produce a different aesthetic result. Comics give the author the liberty to create the characteristic pace of the book, and introduce all these important historical elements in such a limited space. Everything is concentrated; the narration is very dense, as much as it is quick. One single panel can contain so much graphic and literary information that in a large-scale narration can be accomplished within a hundred pages. This, along with the intensity and the palpable heat of the illustration, claims an intense emotional response from the reader. *Ethel & Ernest* is a unique story of a unique couple in a common historical context, narrated in a unique way, juggling several stories and keeping them in the air. The ability to build layers of narration onto the page without a parenthesis to explain yourself or give away your devices is a characteristic of the medium. The way every drawn figure, every panel, every page are bound together, integrated into one narration, encloses not only the narrative intentions of the author, but something of his very own self.

CHAPTER ONE

Constructions in Psychoanalysis; Why Autobiography?

i. Versions of Self

Psychoanalysis is a practise based on the function of language. It is both the process of reading into the story of the patient and the very action of narrating the story itself, depending on the content and at the same time the structure of the narration. The engagement of psychoanalysis with language brings it closer to literature and literary criticism inasmuch as, according to Elizabeth Wright, ‘literary theory is really a theory about how all language works and is itself subject to the laws of language: to investigate literature is always in one way or another, to investigate language’.¹⁴ Language however is not merely a tool, a linguistic code that enables communication, it is as well a means of shaping identity; Stephen Mitchell describes research showing that language is working as a medium to organise the idea of the self and to shape identity:

Studies of bilingual patients suggest that, especially when one language is learned at a developmentally later point than an original language, the different languages reflect very different organisations of self. A person feels different when speaking and thinking in the language learned in early childhood; there are enormous differences in nuance, affective tone, and often access to memories coded and filed in one rather than the other language.¹⁵

Ergo, managing and indexing memory is one of the functions of language, a function connecting it with psychoanalysis. In psychoanalytic terms, memory is a constructed structure, a board on which the person is going to shape the reminiscences that constitute their life history, as if they were putting together

¹⁴ Elizabeth Wright, *Speaking Desires Can Be Dangerous : The Poetics of the Unconscious* (Malden, Mass.: Polity Press, 2000). p. 2.

¹⁵ Stephen A. Mitchell, *Hope and Dread in Psychoanalysis* (New York,: Basic Books, 1993). p. 105.

the pieces of a puzzle where they have the freedom to combine any piece at will and come up with their own desired result. The use of language defines the final outcome. The visual language in comics presupposes that the narrated life story is going to differ from the same story narrated in prose, poetry, cinematography or pantomime; or any other narrative medium.

Moving a step forward, it is thought that psychoanalysis deals not so much with individual patients but with their life stories and, at the same time, with the variety of the forms the narration of those stories can take. The individual, either under the guidance of a psychoanalyst, or simply by actively living their everyday lives, constructs a life story through language; a story that is affected by external factors and in return affects the external reality. From a psychoanalytic perspective, we could say that the very uttering of the story is part of the process of constructing it. The unconscious is revealed when pronounced (either verbally, during the psychoanalytic session, visually via the dreamwork, with the pictorial material of the dream, or virtually through parapraxes, the Freudian lapses that occur in everyday life), thus its existence literally depends on utterance. Elliot notes how according to Freud, the unconscious ‘cannot be known directly. It is only discernible through its effects –through the distortions it inflicts on consciousness’;¹⁶ if we consider art as an effect of the unconscious (or even a symptom of psychopathology), one could say that the work of art is one way into the unconscious traces and manifestations of one’s inner reality. Before it is manifested, the unconscious is not non-existent; it is vague, elusive, intangible; a notion similar to that of God or the weather. Speaking it out loud brings the unconscious into the spotlight; narrating one’s life story is an act of creation.

At times, and for different reasons this constructed perception of one’s past, present and potential, can turn out to be horribly distorted, traumatic for the narrator, depriving them of the means to control their reality. In these cases, psychoanalysis can play a crucial role in re-introducing the story so that it becomes at first bearable and then functional for the patient. Adam Phillips claims that:

¹⁶ Anthony Elliott, *Social Theory and Psychoanalysis in Transition : Self and Society from Freud to Kristeva* (Oxford, UK ; Cambridge, USA: Blackwell, 1992). p. 21

[P]eople have traditionally come to psychoanalytic conversation because the story they are telling themselves about their lives has stopped, or become painful, or both. The aim of the analysis is to restore the loose ends –and the looser beginnings– to the story. But if the story is fixed –if the patient ends up speaking psychoanalysis– we must assume that something has been lost in translation. Psychoanalysis is essentially a transitional language, one possible bridge to a more personal, less compliant idiom.¹⁷

Thus, psychoanalysis undertakes the introduction of different or differentiated forms of narration, picking up on the painful or frustrating elements of the story that have been blocking the flow.

‘Psychoanalysis is a story –and a way of saying stories– that makes some people feel better’,¹⁸ according to Phillips. Whether inside the frame of psychoanalytic treatment or not, the life story is being constantly elaborated, reconstructed as new material is added. In the course of life the story must be sustained and preserved for the individual to be able to hold onto it, since the story is defined by them but also defining them. To add to the confusion, usually the story must be repeated. Every repetition of every part of the life story demands a new narration; every new narration being a new construction, is altering the story, altering the frame, but also reinforcing the belief that the story is objective, providing the necessary certitude (the safe ground). In psychoanalytic terms, the authenticity of the story and the certainty of the patient are not that important. As Phillips states, ‘the psychoanalytic question becomes not is that true? but What in your personal history disposes you to believe that?’¹⁹ It is not a matter of truth or lie, but a matter of understanding, of unconscious operation and predisposition to a specific direction that is fulfilled only on the utterance of the story –thus the creation of the direction that did not exist before the spoken words.

¹⁷ Adam Phillips, *On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored: Psychoanalytic Essays on the Unexamined Life*, paperback ed. (London, etc.: Faber, 1994), p. xx.

¹⁸ Ibid. p. xvii.

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 120

Since every story must be told in a linguistic system, both the structure of the narration and the content of the story are held back by the restrictions of the system or even determined by them. Elizabeth Wright remarks how ‘language alters that to which it refers [...] ...language never arrives at truth but at viabilities, one after another. If there were “real” truths, language would cancel itself out, since if it were to match the world there would be no point in speaking’.²⁰ The potential of each phrase offers countless opportunities for interpretation. The phrasing, the selection of the vocabulary, the tone of voice, the volume even, all are altering factors; factors that never identically recur, thus leaving the space open for the constant reconstruction of even the simplest part of the story. In an example on the concept of monogamy, Phillips demonstrates how the need of the individual to keep exclusivity in the narration of themselves –since it is not possible to eliminate the “unauthorised” versions of the story, the opinion of third parties– results in a social construction that according to some opposes the very nature of biological species:

We work hard to keep certain versions of ourselves in other people’s minds; and, of course, the less appealing ones out of their minds. And yet everyone we meet invents us, whether we like it or not. Indeed nothing convinces us more of the existence of other people, of just how different they are from us, than what they can make of what we say to them. Our stories often become unrecognizable as they go from mouth to mouth. Being misrepresented is simply being presented with a version of ourselves –an invention– that we cannot agree with. But we are daunted by other people making us up, by the number of people we seem to be. We become frantic trying to keep the number down, trying to keep the true story of who we really are in circulation. This, perhaps more than anything else, drives us into the arms of our one special partner. Monogamy is a way of getting the versions of ourselves down to a minimum. And, of course, a

²⁰ Elizabeth Wright, *Speaking Desires Can Be Dangerous : The Poetics of the Unconscious*. p. 62.

way of convincing ourselves that some versions are truer than others –that some are special.²¹

The idea of the self is very much a subject concerning modern psychology. The question of self-identity is fundamental in modernity, which, as Anthony Elliot describes, is constantly triggering the question of identity: ‘Selfhood and personal identity become increasingly precarious in conditions of modernity, as the individual loses all sense of cultural anchorage as well as inner reference points’.²² The sense of personal identity is par excellence related to the psychoanalytic story, identity is structured around the story and because of it, and the more fragmented and conflicted the story is, the more fragmented becomes also the idea of the self. Stephen Frosh notes that:

The self, as summary and integration of personal being, is not a fixed entity: it is constructed out of the bits and pieces of experience and is in dialectic relationship with social organisation. It is full of conflict, particularly between what is desired and what is encountered.²³

This conflict is transferred to the acts of art of the modern intellectual, an art ruled by a latent violence, a force to complicate and confuse the matter further by demanding to be interpreted as much as it resists any interpretation. As we shall see later in this work, the graphic medium for autobiography speaks this convoluted language. It is a medium governed by this forceful need to express while concealing. But what *is* the self? Whatever is hiding under the husk of our frail human bodies is open to interpretation, because it cannot exist if it is not interpreted –and spoken out loud.

Frosh describes the dynamics of the self:

At its simplest, the self can be thought of as a psychological structure that contains within it the various

²¹ Adam Phillips, *Monogamy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996). p. 7

²² Anthony Elliott, *Subject to Ourselves : Social Theory, Psychoanalysis, and Postmodernity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Polity Press, 1996). p. 9.

²³ Stephen Frosh, *Identity Crisis: Modernity, Psychoanalysis and the Self* (Basingstoke, etc.,: Macmillan, 1991). p. 31.

processes of mental life; it is implicit in this idea that there is something organised, stable and central about the self, that selfhood comprises a core element of each individual's personality and subjective existence. In addition, the self has an importantly ambiguous status: it is both an object of knowledge and contemplation and an experiencing subject. I look out at the world from the vantage point of my self; I know what I am through examination of the attributes of that self.²⁴

This self, who operates in a given society, is the speaking as well as the narrated "I" in autobiography. The self is in the case of autobiography both the observer and the observed, a combination of object and subject at the same time. And even more, this self is a biological and an intellectual being, it is soma and psyche.

Autobiographical narration is a narration of the psyche over this soma. The Greek psychoanalyst Cornelius Castoriadis in *The State of the Subject Today* discusses this difficulty of having to deal both with flesh and soul, with only language as the access point; an access point that can fail you at any moment:

Psychoanalysis always encounters a flesh and blood human being who speaks –and who speaks not language in general but in each case a quite particular language– who has or does not have a profession, a family situation, ideas, behaviours, orientations and disorientations. In short, we are always faced with a human reality in which social reality (the social dimension of reality) covers almost all of the psychological reality. And, in a first sense, the 'subject' presents itself as this strange totality, a totality that is not one and is one at the same time, a paradoxical compound of a biological body, a social being (a socially-defined individual) a more or less conscious "person" and, finally,

²⁴ Ibid. p. 2.

an unconscious psyche (a psychical reality and a psychical apparatus), the whole being supremely heterogeneous in makeup and yet definitely indissociable in character.²⁵

This “particular language” which defines each flesh and blood human being is the key to analysis, but it also is the moving force behind works of art, it is the building material of the artistic product. In each form of art the “language of the artist” is supported by a different linguistic system, with its own codes and expressional norms, rendering it unique and demanding an interpretive apparatus that will make it accessible to a more general audience.

ii. Reality and boundaries

Chilean biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela introduced in 1972 their structural descriptions of living organisms as being defined by autopoiesis. In their theory, the biological being is considered to be an autopoietic machine, viz. a network of nerve cells that according to their structure have preordained the perception of the world with only language as a portal and communicative tool.²⁶ According to the two scientists, the nervous system is structurally closed; tending to *create* a world more than *living* within it.²⁷ In order for the system to remain autonomous it has to keep all exterior distractions to a status of minimum influence, so that external factors will not disturb the vital balance that defines the system. Thus the biological system survives by relying on its own productivity in order to survive, consuming the by-products of its own existence, ideally keeping away from any source of distraction.

Speaking from a psychoanalytic perspective, Castoriadis suggests that this is a psychological fact as much as it is biological, suggesting that ‘the living being exists in and through *closure*. In a sense, the living being is a closed ball. We do not enter into the living being’.²⁸ He finds similarities with

²⁵ Cornelius Castoriadis, "The State of the Subject Today," *Thesis Eleven* 24, no. 5 (1989). p. 9.

²⁶ Humberto D. Maturana and Francisco J. Varela, *To Dévτρο Της Γνώσης (El Arbor Del Conocimiento)* (Athens: Katoptro, 1992). pp. 11-20, 240.

²⁷ *Ibid.* p. 12.

²⁸ Castoriadis, "The State of the Subject Today." pp. 16.

psychoanalysis, in the sense that during therapy, but in every other relationship as well, ‘one does not enter into someone as one pleases; one does not even enter in at all. All interpretation –or a period of silence– is heard by someone. That someone hears it: s/he has his/her own predisposed listening apparatus, just as the cell has its own predisposed perceptual/metabolic apparatuses’.²⁹ Castoriadis’s point of view is not far from Maturana and Varela’s biological theories; in a later text they introduce us to the notion of the “observer”, stressing that no one is allowed to forget the fact that ‘the observer explains the observer’;³⁰ a riddle emphasising the fact that every expression of human intellect is evaluated by an observer, another human being, and is decisively assessed by the observer’s headwork –a catch that Maturana and Varela accept to apply to their own assessment.

Summarising, Maturana and Varela have said that human beings (just like every other biological being) are closed systems, which as far as is possible keep external influences away, forming and experiencing their own reality defined by language, by their idiolect. Indeed, Maturana stresses that: ‘we human beings happen in language, and we happen in language as the kind of living systems we are. We have no way to refer to ourselves or to do anything else outside the language. Even to refer to ourselves as non-languaging entities we must be in language. Indeed, the operation of reference exists only in language and to be outside language is, for us as observers, nonsensical’.³¹ The human being acts within the boundaries of language (regardless of the definition of language), works inside, along with or against language, but can never completely overcome it. One cannot write an autobiography without using language, but this language can be any language, not necessarily the spoken or written language, a visual language –a different code– can be used for the communication, for the externalisation of the internal reality. Language is a bridge between one’s intellect and society but it is ‘always necessarily also a code [...]. Language always includes and institutes a

²⁹ Ibid. pp. 17.

³⁰ Humberto R. Maturana and Francisco J. Varela, *Autopoiesis and Cognition : The Realization of the Living*, Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science (Dordrecht, Holland ; Boston: D. Reidel Pub. Co., 1980). p. 39.

³¹ Humberto R. Maturana, "Reality: The Search for Objectivity or the Quest for a Compelling Argument," *The Irish Journal of Psychology* 9(1988). p. 43.

univocal or identitary dimension. It exists only by instituting an identitary dimension and by instituting itself within this dimension'.³²

In this context I would suggest that Winnicott's remark that 'it is the patient and only the patient who has the answers',³³ is an accurate observation, and a principle that psychoanalysis often tends to distort and circumvent. The psychoanalyst is there to provide a way into the patient's experiences, a path that has been blocked by frustration and trauma, but the psychoanalyst is not supposed to provide definite answers for the patient; the psychoanalyst has no authority to narrate the story of the patient. The self-narration has to be formed by the person themselves, something that Castoriadis sees as self-transformation: 'Analysis does not simply put into operation the faculties of the individual, does not actualise a potential which was already present *in actu*; it actualises a potential of the second degree, a capacity of a capacity to be'.³⁴ The responsibility towards the patient is to make them realise their own capacity to be, to make them speak out beyond the obstacle and overcome it through active speech, what Castoriadis calls a "practico-poetic activity", that is an activity of creating through acting, of externalising a blocked source of energy and using it in a therapeutic way against the trauma.

The nature of trauma is such that it attacks the sanctity –the essence indeed– of the individual's closed system. The person, since infancy, will have been framing themselves, creating their personal narration as the boundary, the cell nucleus that enlaces and protects the DNA of the eukaryotic cells. The strength and quality of boundaries differs for each individual, but intrinsically such boundaries must exist. Leigh Gilmore observes that 'the knowing subject works with dissonant material, marked by trauma, and organizes them into a form of knowledge'.³⁵ The frame is built according to the understanding of each person of their world, an understanding dictated retrospectively by the knowledge they have obtained while working the trauma through. However, sometimes either because the person did not have the time to complete the

³² Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1987). p. 238.

³³ D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1989). p. 87.

³⁴ Cornelius Castoriadis, *Crossroads in the Labyrinth* (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1984). P.13.

³⁵ Leigh Gilmore, "Limit-Cases: Trauma, Self-Representation, and the Jurisdictions of Identity," *Biography* 24, no. 1 (2001). p. 134.

building of the frame, or because the external reality is violently penetrating, the exterior world invades the closed system, causing severe trauma and an added sense of instability. According to Winnicott:

[T]rauma implies that the baby has experienced a break in life's continuity, so that primitive defences now become organised to defend against a repetition of 'unthinkable anxiety' or a return of the acute confusional state that belongs to disintegration of nascent ego structure. [...] Madness here simply means a break-up of whatever may exist at the time of a personal continuity of existence.³⁶

Thus the infant immediately strives to close the gap, raise higher walls and repair the inner balance so that the system can be functional again.

However, the fact of being traumatised cannot be erased or reversed. The scar remains, it becomes part of the system, part of the frame defining the future of the organism. The extent of the trauma and the capacity of the organism –the organism here as a psychological entity– define the progress of the healing process. As the organism strives to balance the internal equilibrium, the internal conflict can be manifested in a variety of symptoms. Dominic LaCapra, in his *History and Memory after Auschwitz* says: 'during the occurrence of traumatic events, the imagination may at times provide momentary release or an avenue of escape, but after the event the imagination may be overwhelmed by hallucinations, flash-backs and other traumatic residues that resist the potentially healing role of memory-work'.³⁷ In such cases the severity of the trauma, the extent of the penetration of the foreign agent in the closed system is such that the traditional mechanisms of auto-healing (imagination, memory) cannot act effectively. In fact the very opposite occurs, being so affected by the event they are now malfunctioning, inducing further trauma and keeping the organism in a state of permanent instability. LaCapra continues:

³⁶ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*. p. 97.

³⁷ Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).p. 181.

[I]f memory threatens to become inaccessible, subject to continual doubt, or constituted as an equivocal object of desire, the danger is that imagination –deprived of the sustenance and the safeguards that memory provides– will, if it does not atrophy, alternate between melancholic repetition and superficial manic agitation.³⁸

In a lengthy essay entitled *The Ignored Lesson of Anne Frank*, Bettelheim discusses the reactions of the majority of Jewish population to the outbreak of Nazism. In his opinion most of them succumbed to the death instinct and did not even try to resist the fate that was assigned to them. Referring to the few Jewish activists and anti-Nazis who participated in resistance –and survived– he claims that:

[T]hese people realised that when a world goes to pieces and inhumanity reigns supreme, man cannot go on living his private life as he was wont to do, and would like to do; he cannot, as the loving head of a family, keep the family living together peacefully, undisturbed by the surrounding world; nor can he continue to take pride in his profession or possessions, when either will deprive him of his humanity, if not also of his life. In such time one must radically reevaluate all of what one has done, believed in, and stood for in order to know how to act. In short, one has to take a stand on the new reality –a firm stand, not one of retirement into an even more private world.³⁹

This passage, compared both with historical data and even the author's earlier admissions in the same essay, seems sentimental, wishful thinking, on the part of Bettelheim, who is himself a Holocaust survivor. Admonitions aside though, the fact is that the majority of the population, under the effect of severe shock, behaved as Bettelheim describes earlier in his essay, trying to sustain their

³⁸ Ibid. p. 182.

³⁹ Bruno Bettelheim, *Surviving, and Other Essays*, 1st ed. ed. (New York: Knopf, 1979). p. 257.

integrity (personal and familiar), retreating into a private world, where they could attempt to rebuild the broken frame, raise their walls and fortify their boundaries; all in vain, since the external forces were far too violent and persistent to allow such a retreat.

In this process the action of autobiography –as an exercise in reviving the past– works as a wish-fulfilling mechanism: ‘There may indeed be a misplaced nostalgia here, which further strengthens the tenacity of the fantasy: the lost object never existed; we only imagined it existed –and most importantly, we *continue* to imagine it exists, despite simultaneously knowing that it does not’, according to Spicer.⁴⁰ According to Elliot, the sense of the self must in this circumstance be strengthened: ‘[i]ndividuals develop a sense of the self designed to handle simultaneously the stunning opportunities and destructive terrors of the late modern age’.⁴¹ Assailed by major trauma, all structural mechanisms work to one aim; to create a prior situation where the lost object –and possibly objective– existed and thrived, informing thus anything that is to follow the sequence of its loss, becoming legendary and as such blurring the boundaries between autobiography and fiction; actually introducing fiction into life itself.

iii. Autobiography: Theorising the Self

Autobiography is a category of life-writing, produced by a subject “I” and referring to an object “I”, both of which are resident within the same broader identity. Smith and Watson, in their study of the autobiographical genre make a distinction between four discernible “I”s that comprise this autobiographical “I”. These are: the “real” or historical “I”, the narrating “I”, the narrated “I” and the ideological “I”.⁴² Observed with these distinctions, autobiography is a synthesis, of different aspects of the same entity. The historical “I” is a corporeal being that exists independently of the autobiographical text, and may

⁴⁰ Jakki Spicer, "The Author Is Dead, Long Live the Author: Autobiography and the Fantasy of the Individual," *Criticism* 47, no. 3 (2005). p. 394

⁴¹ Elliott, *Subject to Ourselves : Social Theory, Psychoanalysis, and Postmodernity*. p. 14.

⁴² Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography : A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis ; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001). p. 59

also differ notably from the “I” presented in the autobiographical account. The difference lies mainly to the fact that other, external observers can have a clear and firm personal opinion about it, independent of its own wishes and aspirations; the historical “I” is exposed in the world. The social “I” is an imaginative entity which refers to the socio-cultural context that produces and frames the ideal of the “I”. It is still subject to other people’s interpretations and opinions, but it has more self control, in the sense that it has more liberty to create and present itself. The narrating “I” is located at the present of the writing time, an overarching perspective that gives the narrator the opportunity to perceive the past self as an imaginary whole, but from a distance that is often distorting. It is manipulating and has the liberty to reconstruct personal history at will, according to its own wishes, longings, regrets and instructions. The narrated ‘I’ is helpless; it is constructed at the will of the narrating “I”. Nicola King, speaking about this narrated “I” argues that the authors of autobiographies ‘reconstruct their lives according to the interpretations they have now placed upon them, whilst attempting to maintain the illusion of their earlier ignorance as to the outcome of events’.⁴³ Thus, the narrated “I” is a form of the self that has been reinterpreted, theorised with the benefit of retrospective knowledge; nonetheless presented as the innocent, clueless original who was once wandering on the terra incognita that now has been mapped. As Marcus Moseley observes: ‘The coexistence of the child self with the adult, adult self with child [in autobiography], gives rise to a Janus-faced view of personality’.⁴⁴

The narrating “I”, from its superior position in the present takes up the narration of a different self –the past self– of whom it is definitely a continuation but cannot be simply equated with. Memory used as construction material forces the past into the present in an attempt to unify two situations that cannot be equal: ‘the manner in which memory collapses the given external distinctions between past and present is itself of great significance, but at the same time raises the more general question of the way in which the past

⁴³ Nicola King, *Memory, Narrative, Identity: Remembering the Self*, Nicola King, *Memory, Narrative, Identity : Remembering the Self*, Tendencies (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000). p. 22

⁴⁴ Marcus Moseley, "Jewish Autobiography: The Elusive Subject," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 95, no. 1 (2005). pp. 28-29.

inhabits the present'.⁴⁵ Thus the past becomes present, bringing into the present all that was meant to be past, creating a complicated composite inside which the past is current and its effects are constant (which is not very different from the process of the analysis).

The making of the "life space" that has been pursued with the aid of memory is an energetic procedure during which the past is broken down, interpreted, re-evaluated, and reconstructed as a personal truth which is as firm and conclusive for the narrating "I" as existence itself. According to Smith and Watson:

[R]emembering involves a reinterpretation of the past in the present. The process is not a passive one of mere retrieval from a memory bank. Rather, the remembering subject actively creates the meaning of the past in the act of remembering. [...] That is we inevitably form fragments of memory into complex constructions that become the stories of our lives.⁴⁶

Memory is thus a major question for autobiography. Memory is the construction material for the author/narrator. Even if their research extends to documents, photographs and testimonies from others, everything will be filtered through the prism of the memory of the writing "I". The research material will be used to fill in gaps in the personal memory, to explain recollections, to support opinions; will be merged into the powerful memory and consumed within it; and will finally be presented as biased as anything else. Even if the information received by external, objective sources is contradictory to a previously held (through the function of memory) belief or certainty, the information will be used to set off a conflict that will in all likelihood be consumed within remembering, adapted to fit an interpretation convenient for the Ego. This is not to say that the narrating "I" is lying, for this is not a question of truth or lying, but a question of perception. Autobiography is not history, thus there is no commitment to a factual truth because an autobiography is not a narration of facts. It is a narration about understanding

⁴⁵ Bill Schwarz, "'Not Even Past yet'," *History Workshop Journal*, no. 57 (2004). p. 103

⁴⁶ Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography : A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. p. 16

even about explaining, evaluating the facts and the impact these facts had in the life and the development of an individual. Jakki Spicer, setting forth the characteristics of autobiography notes: 'Indeed, one element of the perceived difference between autobiographies and fiction is that autobiographies provide a kind of proximity, of access, to others and their most intimate truths; it is as if the reader truly *knows* the author in a deeply intimate way, almost *becomes* the author, incorporating his experience'.⁴⁷ It is his *experience*, and not his truth. It is his story and he has a certain liberty to construct it at will; a liberty he didn't have when he was actually living it.

In that respect truth is not a decisive factor; Spicer suggests that 'a text that calls itself autobiographical, in turn, suggests that it might present a "true" (even of not always accurate) representation of the author's life. And yet language –also by its very structure– also always contains the possibility of lying'.⁴⁸ Since biography exists –as psychoanalysis exists– only within language, it is constantly informed by the restrictions and particularities of the medium. Language is frequently not a sufficient medium to express truth as truth is experienced, and autobiographical –and psychoanalytic– language don't proclaim factual truth but truth experienced. As Linda Williams has it, referring to the Freudian notion of the primal scene, 'the child sees or hears something, but the material is itself only gradually inserted into a narrative or a coherent picture as it is actively reworked in memory –a reinterpretation and reinscription of the scene, taking place over time in the development of the subject'.⁴⁹ Thus the primal scene is constructed along the way and may not even refer to an actual incident, but has been reworked and recreated as a distorted memory. However its impact is as strong as if it had been an undisputable truth, thus it *becomes* an undisputable truth in a mode of understanding in which 'a good deal of what we "remember" never in fact entered our consciousness'.⁵⁰ For that reason the objective, factual truth is not relevant to autobiography. Or, as Smith and Watson put it 'autobiographical

⁴⁷ Spicer, "The Author Is Dead, Long Live the Author: Autobiography and the Fantasy of the Individual." p. 396

⁴⁸ Ibid. p. 387

⁴⁹ Quoted in Nicola King, *Memory, Narrative, Identity : Remembering the Self*. p. 18

⁵⁰ Michael Sheringham, *French Autobiography : Devices and Desires : Rousseau to Perec* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993). p. 297

truth is a different matter; it is an intersubjective exchange between narrator and reader aimed at producing a shared understanding of the meaning of life'.⁵¹

Autobiography is not history; its potency does not lie in the recital of more or less interesting events. Each autobiography is a different experience of theorising the self. It is a process in which memory creates the narrated "I" which forges the identity of the narrating "I" in a text that becomes the material manifestation of a life past. The only seal for the existence of autobiography, according to Spicer, is 'the personal entity that stands behind the name of the author – a name that coincides with that of the central character of the autobiography – is the guarantee of autobiography *as* autobiography'.⁵² Michael Sheringham suggests that 'a memory is a memento: a memorial to remind us – for the future – of what is no longer; a material substitute in place of what is absent'.⁵³ This materiality is expressed in the text of the autobiography as a document that is bound to survive the passage of time: 'in saving experience from the ravages of time and in overcoming the discontinuity of past and present, memory turns anterior into interior and converts time into (inner) space'.⁵⁴ Through the process of the autobiography the interior is transferred in the exterior, invoked as text and brought forth into the world. Furthermore, Freud in his essay on *Remembering, Repeating and Working Through* observes how in the course of the analysis 'the patient does not *remember* anything at all of what he has forgotten and repressed, but rather *acts it out*. He reproduces it not as a memory, but as an action; he *repeats* it, without of course being aware of the fact he is repeating it'.⁵⁵ That suggests that "acting it out" is a mechanism employed by the unconscious to deal with a traumatic reality. At the same time, according to Phillips, 'we should remember that writing is itself an action, and that genre is itself a form of repetition that easily obscures its own history, the conflicts it was born out of, the problems which made it feel like a solution'.⁵⁶ Writing can be thus perceived as a substitute for the neurotic compulsion, a way in which the experienced trauma – and so experienced truth –

⁵¹ Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography : A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. p. 13

⁵² Spicer, "The Author Is Dead, Long Live the Author: Autobiography and the Fantasy of the Individual." p. 391

⁵³ Sheringham, *French Autobiography : Devices and Desires : Rousseau to Perec*. p. 313

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* p. 289

⁵⁵ Sigmund Freud, "Remembering, Repeating and Working Through" in *Freud and Phillips, The Penguin Freud Reader*. p. 394.

⁵⁶ Adam Phillips, "Close-Ups," *History Workshop Journal* 57(2004). p. 142.

is brought into being in an attempt to deal with it by understanding it; a construction of the past into and for the present used as a medicine for pain, frustration and loss. The remembrance of the life lived is constructed along the way of narrating the autobiography, according to Jerome Bruner:

[A] life is created or constructed by the act of autobiography. It is a way of constructing experience –and of reconstructing and reconstructing it until our breath or our pen fails us. Construal and reconstrual are interpretive. Like all forms of interpretation, how we construe our lives is subject to our intentions, to the interpretive conversations available to us, and to the meanings imposed upon us by the usages of our culture and language.⁵⁷

This is not to say that a new personality –or a new person– has been created via the process of autobiography. It is more to say that the narrator/author has by the completion of an autobiography created a methodology –a theory– about interpreting (and through interpretation, understanding) their life. Michael Payne notes that ‘there is on this first interactive level of theory a fundamental affirmation that theory is how we critically see things, how we make productive mistakes, and how those recognized errors enable us to see ourselves and each other better’.⁵⁸ Travelling through language and its restrictions, by reincarnating the past and its impossibility, Spicer tells us ‘autobiography is impossible *and* exists. The desire for autobiography, the fantasy of autobiography, can withstand its impossibility; I would suggest that it *necessarily* withstands its own impossibility –its task, like the fetish, is to protect one against loss or absence’.⁵⁹ An autobiography is not a book (though of course it can be a book as much as anything else), nor merely a narration, but it is a method of building

⁵⁷ Jerome Bruner, “The Autobiographical Process” in Robert Folkenflik, *The Culture of Autobiography : Constructions of Self-Representation*, Irvine Studies in the Humanities (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1993). p. 38.

⁵⁸ Michael Payne, "What Difference Has Theory Made? From Freud to Adam Phillips," *College Literature* 32, no. 2 (2005). p. 1.

⁵⁹ Spicer, "The Author Is Dead, Long Live the Author: Autobiography and the Fantasy of the Individual." p. 392

the past and situating one's self within it, dealing with it and explaining –not the facts, but the reasons.

In this case if we consider comics to be the language and life-writing to be the genre, the books I am going to talk about in the following chapters are a corpus of personal narrations which construct a sense of personal identity. This construction provides a sense of self-control, but at the same time allows unconscious energies to be released into the work, to reinforce the narrating will of the unconscious, to let it express its pain and grievance (to deal with the trauma). The analysis and interpretation of these works is interesting, not merely for the results concerned, but also in terms of structure and expression.

CHAPTER TWO

***Maus*: Managing the Transgenerational Trauma**

To talk about *Maus* is to talk about a generation of people trying to deal with events they did not experience and a trauma they themselves did not suffer, but which have shaped, and stigmatised their very existence from the moment of their birth. In this chapter I am going to discuss the construction of self-identity under the pressure of the transgenerational trauma occurring from the parental experience of the Holocaust and how this trauma is presented via the graphic medium. In addition, *Maus* allows for a discussion of the strategic use of photography in contrast to, but also in an open dialogue *with* the graphic medium manifesting both the power of the photographic image and the power of the graphic medium to (re)construct a life story. At the same time it clearly juxtaposes the differences between the two media and their different functionalities in terms of presentation and interpretation. These two powerful means of representation are used in *Maus* in order to create a strong antithesis which echoes the testimony of the Holocaust survivor and the psychological strain of belonging to the second generation of survivors.

Comics is an intrinsically narrative medium, a means to transform the pictorial element from a static representation to a fluent recitation of events. Unlike the photographer the creator of the comic can include or omit elements as they consider necessary for the continuity of their plot. They can point out what is most important and erase any confusing addition. A photograph is what it is (despite the retouching and modifying technology), a comics panel is what you make it be. During the narration in the form of the graphic medium, the idea of the self is elevated, acquiring a solid status as identity. Since comics autobiographies:

[R]ely on the sequential repetition of this self image: the cartoonist must draw multiples of her- or himself to create continuity over a series of frames. Each discrete image substitutes for the one before it [...]. What this means, ultimately, is that there are literally hundreds of selves

drawn by the cartoonist assembling a sequential life narrative. [...]. A single frame may contain multiple selves, just as, over the sequence of frames, that self may mutate. The cartoonist, unlike the prose writer, works in a medium the very syntax of which demands that the subject always be split and frequently be multiple.⁶⁰

The “self” is drawn and re-drawn, multiplying and mutating, dominating the work, evolving and changing. The author is, in a word, *constructing* the story of the life of the narrative object

In the case of the Holocaust, the persistence in the narration is essential in terms of the post-war management of the event for the survivors. Dori Laub states: ‘The survivors did not only need to survive so that they could tell their story; they also needed to tell their story in order to survive. There is, in each survivor, an imperative need to tell and thus to come to know one’s story, unimpeded by ghosts from the past against which one has to protect oneself. One has to know one’s buried truth in order to be able to live one’s life’.⁶¹ Hence the narration is a precondition for survival, even retrospectively. But it is not just the narration per se; Laub’s “buried truth” which cannot be anything but a constructed truth, constructed through and *for* the narration is intended to bear a therapeutic effect. Indeed, Shoshana Felman notes that ‘one does not have to possess or own the truth, in order to effectively bear witness to it; that speech as such is unwittingly testimonial; and that the speaking subject constantly bears witness to a truth that nonetheless continues to escape him, a truth that is, essentially not available to its own speaker’.⁶² In summation this “buried truth” is essential for the survivor to keep finding meaning in their lives (which is essential for them in order to continue to live), but since it is also “not available” it has to be constructed in order to serve this purpose. The construction occurs through communication in the form of narration, when the experience is implausibly delineated and codified, put into words and offered to the next generation as it is carried further by the recording media. Granted

⁶⁰ Candida Rifkind, "Drawn from Memory: Comics Artists and Intergenerational Auto/Biography," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 38, no. 3 (2008). p. 403.

⁶¹ Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony : Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1991). p. 78.

⁶² *Ibid.* p. 15.

that comics have a unique capacity for complexity, we see how the medium can be used to produce an artistically and psychologically fruitful result.

Survivor's accounts of the Holocaust vary, depending on the experience of each individual. Some people went through the hell of the concentration camp. Some managed to remain alive by hiding in bunkers and attics. Others procured a non-Jewish identity and, pretending to be somebody else, lived under the constant threat of exposure. A few went underground and fought with their national resistance movements, at times only to be betrayed by their anti-Semitic comrades (a common case in Poland for example). The variety of individual cases is partly a source of the survivor's guilt syndrome. Initially, the survivor feels guilty because they managed to live when others did not, sometimes by working against their fellow sufferers, their survival instinct prevailing over their loyalties. This can trigger feelings of being ineligible to understand other people's traumata; since they remained alive when other people did not survive they are not eligible to claim that they have known the same pain. Similarly, there can be a feeling that since other people have suffered more severe privations (e.g. being captive in a concentration camp rather than living in hiding, living in hiding rather than going to exile, etc.) they are not entitled to reveal their own trauma; or even bear one. Consequently she cannot confront her trauma and come to terms with it –or even find a more effective way of coping with it– because the very admission of having the trauma evokes more traumatic feelings of guilt and self-accusation. Thus the process of mourning cannot take place and the trauma cannot be worked through.

In psychological terms however, the actual conditions within which the trauma occurred are indifferent. In his study of Holocaust victims Aaron Hass asks the following simple question: 'But how does one measure fear?'.⁶³ On what scale can we weigh the fear of the concentration camp prisoner against the fear of the partisan; or the fear of someone living in a bunker, dependent on the good-intentions or generosity of other people, in a time when every trust given is a terrible risk? And how can one measure the fear occurring through the gradual exposure of the enormity of the menace? The realisation that the threat is tangible, and that one's existence is subject to malevolent intentions

⁶³ Aaron Hass, *The Aftermath: Living with the Holocaust* (Cambridge,; Cambridge U.P., 1996). p. 9.

cannot be without consequence. Hass remarks: ‘As an act of self-preservation, we can feel only so much sadness, so much revulsion. Indeed, the emotionally numb survivor has been described and reported by many investigators’.⁶⁴ The extremity of the circumstances and the acuteness of the internal pressure have permanent implications for the victim. Bettelheim, himself a Holocaust victim, finds that ‘the psychological cause of childhood schizophrenia is the child’s subjective feeling of living permanently in an extreme situation –of being totally helpless in the face of mortal threats, at the mercy of insensitive powers motivated only by their own incomprehensible whims, and of being deprived of any intimate, positive, need-satisfying personal relationships’,⁶⁵ thus stressing how the state of helplessness (which is both a source and a consequence of fear) is a decisive factor in permanent trauma and has psychological consequences, regardless of the circumstances.⁶⁶

In *Maus*, the narration of the father is accompanied by the son’s narration of the conditions of the interview. Vladek is a Polish Jew who, after surviving Auschwitz, moved with his wife Anja, a survivor herself, to the United States where they had one son, Artie (Artie is their second child, as their first-born, Richieu died during the war). Vladek is presented in the novel as a typical survivor; he is cold, distant, moody, disturbed by the memories he cannot shake off. By interviewing his father and turning his survivor’s story into a graphic novel, Art Spiegelman attempts to comprehend his own inherited trauma, which he has been carrying throughout his life. In this way the account of the survivor is paired with the perception of the second generation. It is in this respect quite a different work from *Ethel and Ernest* mentioned in the introduction earlier. *Maus* is the biography of the author’s parents, as well as the story of an era (and a most turbulent one), just like *Ethel and Ernest*. But in *Maus* the involvement of the author’s narrating “I” is more prominent and is serving a more complex purpose. Briggs does appear in his book but in his case it is a cameo appearance. He is there because he is part of the story, as the son

⁶⁴ Ibid. p. 62.

⁶⁵ Bettelheim, *Surviving, and Other Essays*. p. 117.

⁶⁶ Bettelheim’s work is from the 1970s, and modern research on schizophrenia may have other causes to present, but the assumption of a shattered personality, broken under the force of external superimpositions remains. Regardless of the validity of Bettelheim’s theory however, his position is interesting and important precisely because it is coming from a man who carries the past of a Holocaust victim, and his theoretical approach cannot but have been informed by his own traumatic experience.

of the two people he is writing about. Because of this necessary appearance his own fears and regrets come into the work, but the book is primarily a biography of his parents. Spiegelman writes himself into the story. It is not only the circumstances of his birth that have been troubling him (he is indeed the product of a historical massacre, and he has been carrying this reality for his entire life). In *Maus* he does not just appear because he happens to be Vladek and Anja's son, instead he is the brutal force that demands and makes the narration happen.

In the opening scene of the book Artie asks his father to share his Auschwitz testimony, to which Vladek responds: 'It would take many books, my life, and no one wants anyway to hear such stories'.⁶⁷ Nonetheless the father is easily persuaded to start the tale from the years of his youth, before the war. As the plot unfolds, the war-story of the father is interrupted by the narration of the son concerning the circumstances and difficulties of the interview. By this means, the author outlines the mechanics of fear. The episodes the father narrates are, for the most part, in chronological order, presenting his relationship with another girlfriend before he meets Artie's mother, Anja. Twenty five pages into the story the father tells the son that he doesn't want him to write the story of Lucia, which 'has nothing to do with Hitler, with the Holocaust!'.⁶⁸ Interestingly his request is ignored (though mentioned in the book). The story is told anyway and the narration continues with the first time Vladek met his wife-to-be, their courtship, their wedding, the birth of their first child and some small familial crises. At the same time the first signs of anti-Semitism and Nazism slowly intrude. As the intentions of the Nazis become clearer the Jews in the story seem unable to perceive the magnitude of the threat. The invasion of Poland, the restrictions on Jewish activities –social and professional–, the pogroms, the ghettos; all the signs of the imminent peril are there, but are not read correctly or in time. During the novel these clues are being re-examined in hindsight, illuminated by the light of history, and Vladek's life story is reconstructed in revision.

This constant gradation of the situation, along with the frequent breaks caused by the narration of the son, manifests the mechanism of fear. If the father's account was given without the intermezzo episodes of the present, the

⁶⁷ Art Spiegelman, *The Complete Maus* (London: Penguin Books, 2003). p. 14.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* p. 25.

story would be equally horrendous, because the historical truth is horrendous, but it would lack the force of cultivated fear that empowers it now. As Marcus Moseley writes: 'Since memory reaches back toward the self as a child, but the act of memory occurs within the self as adult, an irresolvable temporal dilemma lies at the heart of the autobiographical enterprise. In face of this dilemma, autobiographical discourse evinces a marked tendency to collapse into the present'.⁶⁹ The past is connected to and informed by the present, and the act of autobiography would be pointless without a reference point in the present. In *Maus* the present reference point is prominent. Ergo, on one level the narration of the son works as a blank space, where the reader awaits the next step into the father's story, while having time to process the information received so far. Step by step Vladek and Anja, and along with them six million European Jews walk to their destruction, deprived of their basic humanity and reduced to mere organic matter in the eyes of their tormentors (who are not alien, foreign invaders, but, friends and neighbours, employers and employees, people of the everyday); step by step *Maus* reveals this inexorable march towards death.

Maus is generally acclaimed as a graphic novel about the Holocaust, however it is also a book talking about its legacy, the second generation of survivors and the internalisation of the trauma for those born after the Second World War, an event which was already history. Despite objections— that comics are a medium oriented to entertainment, inappropriate to deal with a matter of such gravity as the Holocaust— it remains a fact that *Maus* is a highly praised graphic novel, which has attracted many awards, including a Pulitzer Price Special Award in 1992.

Yet the debate remains, and it is usually posed as an ethical question: the depiction of the victimised Jews as mice and of the Nazis as cats, caught in an endless bestial chase. Spiegelman's decision to portray them in this way is controversial, and it has been received in opposite ways. On the one hand, a brilliant metaphor to underline the brutality of the Nazi regime against the Jewish population. On the other hand, a blasphemous, desensitising invention de-humanizing the protagonists, and obscuring the fact that the Holocaust was a crime committed by man against man.

⁶⁹ Moseley, "Jewish Autobiography: The Elusive Subject." p. 29.

Spiegelman's cat-mouse metaphor, does not introduce something novel in the Holocaust discourse. He reworks a theme used by the Third Reich propaganda against the "Jewish peril". The epigraph in the opening of the book quotes Adolf Hitler: 'The Jews are undoubtedly a race, but they are not human',⁷⁰ a statement which helped prepare the German nation to dehumanise the Jews as a precursor to the planned genocide. In his study of representations of the enemy, Sam Keen writes: 'As a rule, human beings do not kill other human beings. Before we enter into warfare or genocide, we first dehumanize [sic] those we mean to "eliminate"',⁷¹ suggesting that the argument that Spiegelman's metaphor is inappropriate is irrelevant to the actual problem. As important as it is to know that the Holocaust was a crime committed by man against man, it is equally important to comprehend that those who committed the crime believed as a result of vigorous propaganda that they had been called to exterminate a source of pestilence. As Zygmunt Bauman states: 'Categorical murder is meant to deprive the appointed human target of their lives –but also, and a priori– to expropriate them from their humanity, of which the right to subjectivity, to self-guided action is an indispensable, indeed a constitutive, ingredient'.⁷² Accordingly, Spiegelman's metaphor works by reminding that it is possible for man to consider another man as inhuman, with the most terrible outcome. Using the flexibility provided by the graphic medium, Spiegelman suggests that not only can a people be thought of and treated as vermin, but it is just as easy (if not easier) for another people to be turned into a predator, a beast with no mercy, regrets or morals.

The idea of presenting Jews as mice is older than Nazism and the Holocaust:

In a scale of dehumanisation, we drop from the midpoint of the subhuman barbarian to the nonhuman, from the savage to the animal. A "running dog of capitalism", a "Nazi swine", a "Jap rat", a "Commie bear", are clearly

⁷⁰ Spiegelman, *The Complete Maus*. p. 10.

⁷¹ Sam Keen, *Faces of the Enemy : Reflections of the Hostile Imagination* (San Francisco ; London: Harper and Row, 1988). p. 25.

⁷² Zygmunt Bauman, "Categorical Murder, or: How to Remember the Holocaust" in Ronit Lentin, *Re-Presenting the Shoah for the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004). p. 26.

dangerous, irrational animals, capable of cunning, whom we are morally justified in killing without mercy. The lower down in the animal phyla the images descended, the greater sanction is given to the soldier to become a mere exterminator of pests. The anti-Semitic propaganda that reduced the Jew to mouse or rat was an integral part of the creation of the extermination camps. [...]. The Jew was reduced to “cargo” by being shipped in cattle cars, to a contaminated pest that should be exterminated by poison gasses originally designed as pesticides.⁷³

This type of propaganda irrevocably marks both victim and victimiser in a way that has been masterly expressed, earnestly but discretely, in the graphic medium in *Maus*. The flexibility in representation provided by the nature of the medium allows for the author/artist to present a picture of history where propaganda is presented nakedly and involves both sides; the representation of the German Nazis as cats shows what the propaganda didn't tell:

The use of bestial images seems initially to be one of the better ways of dehumanizing an enemy because it allows soldiers to kill without incurring guilt. But the problem is that it allows the warrior-become-exterminator little sense of dignity or pride in his skill in battle. There is little emotional purgation gained from the slaughter of such an enemy –no heroic sparring with a worthy opponent, no cosmic drama of a battle against enemies of God, no wrestling with barbarian giants. Only an escalating brutality and insensitivity to suffering and death.⁷⁴

In *Maus* the story occupies two timelines, the present of the action of the narration and the past of the narrated story; in the first it is the autobiographical story of the son-father relationship and in the second the biographical account of the father. However, the animal metaphor is maintained across both

⁷³ Keen, *Faces of the Enemy : Reflections of the Hostile Imagination*. pp. 60-61.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 61-62.

dimensions and is not reserved for the references to the war and the Nazi regime. The author himself is represented as a mouse, underlying the fact that the trauma has been inherited.

The narrator pin-points this feeling while referring to his father's story: 'Don't get me wrong. I wasn't obsessed with this stuff... It's just that sometimes I'd fantasise Zyklon B coming out of our shower instead of water. I know this is insane, but somehow I wish I had been in Auschwitz with my parents so I could really know what they lived through! I guess it's some kind of guilt about having had an easier life than they did'.⁷⁵ The novel is a world in which a mouse remains a mouse even years after the cats have stopped chasing it, and gives birth only to new mice, themselves potential prey, living in fear and burdened with guilt.

As mentioned already, Vladek's narration begins before the war, when as a young textile merchant he meets his wife-to-be. Past the period of flirting, he marries the fragile and sensitive Anja who, after giving birth to their first child, develops post-natal depression and needs to be hospitalised in an expensive sanatorium in Czechoslovakia, at the beginning of 1938. During the train journey to the sanatorium, Vladek sees the swastika for the first time. The graphic representation of this first encounter with the symbol of all the suffering to follow is worthy of the significance of the event. The incident occupies a double page spread. On the first page two square panels are followed by a large strip wherein the swastika is revealed (Plate 2.1). The smaller panels are drawn as if the camera shoots from an external point through the window and into the train coach where Vladek, Anja and other Jewish characters are travelling. Thus the first impression of them witnessing the Nazis misappropriated symbol is read on their faces, shocked, wide-eyed; as they press against the window, point out and cry 'LOOK!'.⁷⁶ In the large, dominating panel, the camera is located inside the coach, behind the protagonists' backs and towards the window. This is when the reader sees the swastika, narratively after the protagonists. However, since the flag is drawn exactly on the centre of the page and dominates the visual field of the reader, the fact is that the reader will have seen the flag even before the protagonists have. The flag is double-framed, in the strip itself and in the upper part of the

⁷⁵ Spiegelman, *The Complete Maus*. p. 176.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* p. 34.

train's window, underlying the significance of the moment, the event and the symbolic power emerging from it.

On the second page a fellow passenger tells the story of his cousin, who



PLATE 2.1: *The Complete Maus*, p. 34

lives in Germany:

He had to sell his business to a German and run out from the country without even the money. It was very hard there for the Jews -terrible! Another fellow told us of a relative in Brandenburg -the police came to his house and

no one heard again from him. It was many, many such stories, Jews beaten with no reason, whole towns pushing out all Jews each story worse than the other.⁷⁷

This introduction to the Jewish ordeal in Germany is illustrated in four strips showing respectively the Gestapo patrolling outside a Jewish shop, the Gestapo ridiculing Jews by forcing them to parade while holding placards bearing the inscription “I’m a filthy Jew”, the Gestapo beating up a couple of suffering mice and finally, a picturesque little town, peaceful and serene, with houses in a row and with no people on the streets; only a sign across the town entrance writing: “This town is Jew Free”. In the sequence of all four strips, the background has been occupied by the Nazi flag. A total black background, without margins but the bright circle, where the swastika is inscribed, to mark the space. In the last square, the picture of the peaceful town, the bright circle is located exactly where a rising sun should be, marking the uprising of Nazism with a bloodcurdling effect.

The following couple of pages deal only with Anja’s illness and her recovery in the beautiful secluded sanatorium; making the previous incident even more shocking; since it is segregated from its sequence, a horrible instance in between moments of ordinary family life. Nonetheless the die has been cast, even if its effects are not going to be obvious for a few more pages. In the last panel of the flag-revealing sequence it is obvious that the importance of the incident is understood by the train passengers, though naturally not in its entirety. One passenger says “Let’s hope those Nazi gangsters get thrown out of power!”. His fellow passenger replies “Just pray that they don’t start a war”. None of the characters can at this time imagine what is to follow (Plate 2.2).

So far we spoke about the controversy over *Maus*’s publication, due to the sensitive nature of its subject, and aggravated by the zoomorphic representation of the heroes that categorises the characters at a glance; Jews drawn as mice; Germans drawn as cats; Poles drawn as pigs; French drawn as frogs; and Americans drawn as dogs. The effect of this representation is that early in the book the personal tone of the novel is set and the emotional impact is not merely a subject in the content of the story –the survivor’s narration– but

⁷⁷ Ibid. p. 35.

it is due to the visual narrative, the element that is diacritical to the medium of comics.



PLATE 2.2: *The Complete Maus*, p. 35

This norm breaks down on special occasions only. The first of these occasions appears in Volume I, with the inset presentation of an earlier story of the author, *Prisoner on the Hell Planet: A Case History*, where the characters are anthropomorphic, drawn in the manner of Edvard Munch, nightmarish, dark and intense. In the opening panel of this story a real photograph of the author and his mother has been attached, thus creating a peculiar air of truthfulness; a disarming sensation for the reader.

The first volume is dedicated to Anja, the photo of whom comes at this point as a shock. Anja is the elusive subject, the lost object that cannot be retrieved –no suicide note left, her diaries burned by Vladek, her account never recorded, and never to be so. The traces of her are her pictures and her memory, projected by her son onto the page. Anja lives again in the pages of *Hell Planet*, and dies again and again because regardless of the smiling picture at the beginning of the short story, she is always dead at the end of it. Susan Sontag says: ‘All photographs are memento mori. To take a photograph is to participate in another person’s (or thing’s) mortality, vulnerability, mutability’.⁷⁸ That is why the photograph serves as the only document of her existence, not as a Jewish mouse, but as a woman, someone who has *been* and created life and affected history in the years she lived.

Comics is a complex medium, comprising both textual and visual elements which constitute a compound narrative with its own peculiar visual grammar. Distinctively, comics can contain successive time-references within a single frame; and thus create the illusion of motion within an otherwise static medium. Indeed, temporality is critical in defining and understanding comics. This is an idea more easily explained if we consider speech balloons, wherein a whole conversation can take place within one panel; a condition that requires multiple time-point references. That is, maybe, the main difference between a comics’ panel and a photograph. One photograph represents strictly one point in time, a single instant that is immortalised but not articulated. The photograph has value as a memento of the instant, but it is only valid as long as there is an interpreter (someone who has been present in this particular scene, or is otherwise involved with the place or characters); it is a fragment of time, a segmental proof for the existence of the shot, but it contains no narration, except by causal implication. A photograph –if it is to have more than aesthetic value– is something that has to be explained by somebody who was present in the real life scene, since the shot provides no narrative connections . As Danett and Spence point out: ‘Useful as this may be as an initial step, it cannot be emphasised enough that a photograph used alone can only reveal surface information, and that additionally, text can drastically change such apparent

⁷⁸ Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, 1st Anchor Books ed. (New York: Anchor Books, 1990). p. 15.

meaning'.⁷⁹ The meaning of a photograph depends on the attached material, whether this is text or a spoken testimony.

The second occasion on which the zoomorphic paradigm is dropped is meta-textual, at the beginning of Volume II; it occurs before the narration begins, in the inscription (the book is dedicated to the author's dead brother and his two very young at the time, and very living children) where another photograph is presented. This is the photograph of Richieu; the little brother who was poisoned by his aunt to avoid ending up in the gas chambers. The ghost-brother who was dead before Artie was born; the picture of whom has always been hanging in the parents' bedroom, a silent reminder of all that has been lost: family, fortune, homeland, sense of security and joy.

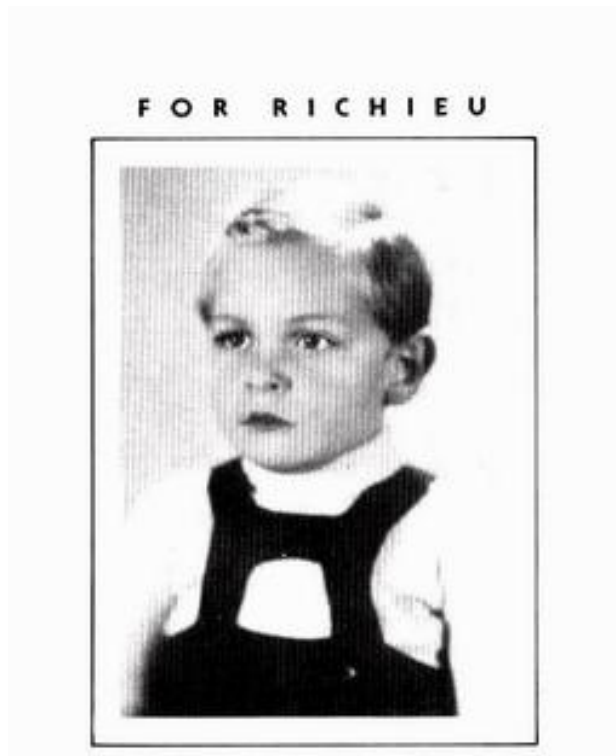


PLATE 2.3: *The Complete Maus*, p. 165

Assuming that anyone who comes to Volume II has been through Volume I (a fairly safe assumption since only the omnibus edition has been published since 1996), the reader is already aware of Richieu and of his fate. The characters

⁷⁹ Terry Danett and Jo Spencer, "Photography, Ideology and Education" in Edward Buscombe and Richard Collins, *Representation and Photography : A Screen Education Reader* (Houndsmills: Palgrave, 2001).

with which the reader has been acquainted do carry the metaphor of their personification as mice, the weight of the realisation that they have been dealt with as vermin and have been exterminated as non-human; however, this graphic representation of the metaphor transposes the story and the characters into a quasi-fictional universe. The de-humanisation the Nazis attempted to achieve against the Jewish population is a major theme in *Maus*. For that reason the presence of Richieu's photograph is shocking for the reader (Plate 2.3). Not only do these characters, who so far have been treated almost as a fictional construction, acquire a human status, but they acquire a face as well. It is not anymore the idea of "Richieu" that we experience throughout the book. This is a real boy, who was born, who lived and played and cried, who died a cruel death about which we have learned during our reading. Gabriele Schwab suggests that: 'In Art's life, this photograph made Richieu a ghost brother who, despite his overpowering presence, could never become *real*. By contrast, in Art's comic book, Richieu gains a relatively higher degree of reality than the other characters who, when compared to a real photographic representation, remain after all cartoons'.⁸⁰ In the confrontation between photograph and cartoon, the cartoon, by its inherent abstraction, seems to lose; however, there is no such antagonism, the photograph is charged with its significance by being referenced within the illustrated world of *Maus*.

In the meantime, it is clear that Artie feels and acts as a replacement child, created in order to fill in the gap left by somebody he never came to know, substantially supposed 'to fill an emptiness, a nothing'.⁸¹ In her autobiographical account, Nadine Fresco talks about the experience of belonging to the second generation after the Holocaust:

Born after the war, sometimes to replace a child who died in the war, the Jews I am speaking of here feel their existence as a sort of exile, not from a place in the present or future, but from a time, now gone forever, which would have been that of identity itself.⁸²

⁸⁰ Gabriele Schwab, "Replacement Children: The Transgenerational Transmission of Traumatic Loss," *American Imago* 66, no. 3 (2009). p. 282.

⁸¹ *Ibid.* p. 284.

⁸² Nadine Fresco, "Nadine Fresco: Remembering the Unknown," *International Journal/Review of Psychoanalysis* 11(1984), <http://www.anti-rev.org/textes/Fresco84a/body.html>. p. 5.

Implied here, as well as in *Maus*, is that the second generation suffers a lack of orientation, not only have its representatives been deprived of a sense of identity, but they have no means of creating one, since all the creative power has been absorbed by the force of the parental trauma. These people are not who they are supposed to be (life has rendered this impossible) because they were created to replace somebody else, an immense burden for anyone to carry. Furthermore, it is an impossible task: because they are asked to take the place of children who died so young, before they even had the chance to become someone. The new children are thus competing not only with the dead sibling, but with the unfulfilled potential of this dead sibling, as voiced by a critical parental voice—a voice in grieving, which makes it impossible to ignore.

The mouse-cat metaphor is consistent throughout the book, with two exceptions, the inlaid comic short story about the author's mother's suicide, as we saw before, written more than ten years before *Maus* was published; and early in the second volume of the novel; a scene in which we see the narrator approaching a breakdown of his own. The second Volume of *Maus* begins with the arrival of Artie's parents in Auschwitz. The mode of the narration follows the patterns set in the first volume; Vladek's story and the story of Artie painstakingly extracting his father's biography. The second chapter of the book, however, is quite distinct in terms of graphical representation. The chapter, entitled "Time Flies" opens with a monologue by the narrator:

Vladeck died of congestive heart failure on August 18, 1982... Françoise and I stayed with him in the Catskills back in August 1979. Vladeck started working as a tinman in Auschwitz in the spring of 1944... I started working on this page at the very end of February 1987. In May 1987 Françoise and I are expecting a baby... Between May 16, 1944, and May 24 1944 over 100,000 Hungarian Jews were gassed in Auschwitz... in September 1986, after 8 years of work, the first part of *Maus* was published. It was a critical and commercial success. At least fifteen foreign editions are coming out. I've gotten 4 serious offers to turn my book into a TV special or movie (I don't wanna).

In May 1968 my mother killed herself (she left no note).
Lately I've been feeling depressed.⁸³

It is not only the monologue –factual, plain and flat– which underlines the turbulent mental state of the author (which he admits to at the end of his recitation anyway). It is the graphical representation of the fact that there has been a break in the continuity between the previous and the current chapter. In the first panel, the narrator is drawn side-on, and one can spot the difference immediately. While in all the previous parts of the book all the characters have a human body and an animal head, which forms a zoomorphic but discrete entity, in this opening panel we can see the back of a human head, wearing a large mouse mask, tied behind his head with a piece of string (Plate 2.4).



PLATE 2.4: *The Complete Maus*, p. 201

⁸³ Spiegelman, *The Complete Maus*. p. 201

There are four small panels and a final large one that occupies half the page. Through the sequence the focus zooms out. First we only see the masked face and a couple of flies buzzing around. Then face and hand and more flies. Then the artist bent over his desk and finally the surprise, the graphic artist's desk standing on top of a pile of corpses; all famished, anguished, and truly mice-headed. In the pages to follow it becomes obvious that the pairing of his father's death, with the success of the book has become a source of desolation for the author.

A speech balloon from an off-panel character speaks the final line of the sequence: 'Alright Mr Spiegelman... We're ready to shoot!'. The proposals for commercial exploitation of the success of the first volume are one more blow for the author-narrator who cannot cope with the information that has been revealed to him, feelings that this information has evoked and the course of this situation after the publication of his novel. The person hidden out of the edge of the panel makes a blunt comment, the choice of verb "to shoot" clearly refers to some sort of photography or filming (this is verified upon the turning of the page) but still it cannot be read without implying a reference to the fate of so many of the Nazi's victims. The feeling is that the success is exploitation according to Erin McGlothlin:

[B]ased on their suffering and death. His aesthetic project and its commercial success are predicated on the trauma, loss, and destruction of others, and this figures him as a co-operator, one who is able to constitute himself by annihilating others. In a sense, by telling his father's story, he reproduces the death of the victims at the same time; he revives them only to have them murdered once more, with him in the director's chair, staging the spectacle.⁸⁴

The combination of the drawn pile of corpses with the faceless announcement about the shooting constructs a new layer regarding the

⁸⁴ Erin McGlothlin, "No Time Like the Present: Narrative and Time in Art Spiegelman's "Maus", *Narrative* 11, no. 2 (2003). p. 189.

narrator/author himself. He stands atop a hill formed by dead bodies while wearing a mouse mask, not as one of them, never one of them, neither a survivor nor a victim but an impostor, an appropriator who uses his ancestral legacy to accomplish this success. In a twisted way he has climbed to success stepping over the dead bodies of his own people.

In the next page Artie is being interviewed by several members of the press with some praising him, others confronting him and still more blaming him for reminding the world of old histories that do not belong to modernity. He has no real answers to give to those people who are hiding behind masks themselves, stepping on the dead corpses as well, without obvious awareness of the fact; they keep crowding him until he starts shrinking, turning to a scared child who cries for his mother, still wearing his mouse mask. The mask must be interpreted, since this is the only passage where it occurs in the whole novel. It can be seen as a means of cheating, hiding and deluding. It can be a beneficent device as well as a befooling trick. The bearer of the mask can be either a fugitive from an immense doom –like his parents when they try to escape the ghetto wearing the mask of pigs, viz. dressed as Poles– or the deceitful instrument of an impostor. It seems likely that the image which the narrator retains for himself is the latter, underlying an existent condition amongst the children of survivors who feel that they can never identify themselves in the course of history: they never suffered the actual horror that their parents went through, yet they grew up in an environment where the trauma was transferred to them. Solely the trauma, without any of the credit. According to Gabrielle Schwab:

They are haunted by a death or even millions of deaths that they did not directly experience. The experience of death comes to them secondhand, so to speak, through its impact on the parents. It comes in the form of moods or emotions, taking on many shapes, including grief or

anxiety, hypervigilance or numbness, emotional unavailability or uncontrolled rage.⁸⁵

Artie, under the pressure of the success of the book, the death of his father and the pregnancy of his wife experiences most of these emotions, which are graphically represented by him shrinking to the size of a child, before he takes off to visit Pavel, his psychotherapist and a Holocaust survivor himself. He climbs down from his desk and walks amongst the decaying corpses to get away. Their session is a conversation about what it means to be a survivor, what it is to carry the survivor's guilt and how this guilt has been transferred to the next –uninvolved– generation. Artie retains his child-like form and his mouse mask throughout the session.

This parenthetical situation ends when the mouse-masked narrator starts playing the recordings of his conversations with his father. When the father-as-victim is revived and his presence forcing the narration forward is re-established, even through the technical medium of the tape recorder, the visual narrative returns to its previous means of representation. The re-establishment of the father as the sovereign of the narration abolishes the need for the mask. The crisis that the death of the father created initially is shelved through the resumption of the narration of the story. This parenthesis however, introduces a third point in the timeline of the story which initially had been the past of the narration of the father and the present of the narration of the son. The son now acquires two “presents”, namely the present of the recorded tape and the present after the death of the father, creating thus a third diegetic level, as according to Erin McGlothlin: ‘the movement between diegetic levels occurs with the absorption of the father’s trauma into the son’s memory through the very agency of narrative, the act of storytelling’.⁸⁶ After the end of this intermission the narration returns to this time point only in the last page of the book which comprises three rows of panels with a closing drawing on the bottom. The two top rows are the last part of the narration of the father,

⁸⁵ Schwab, "Replacement Children: The Transgenerational Transmission of Traumatic Loss." p. 286.

⁸⁶ McGlothlin, "No Time Like the Present: Narrative and Time in Art Spiegelman's "Maus"." p. 184.

in which he is reunited with his wife at the end of the war. The last two panels in the last row are a return to the intermediate present. Artie sits by his father's deathbed who concludes his story with these words 'I'm tired from talking, Richieu, and it's enough stories for now...'.⁸⁷ The last drawing is of the tomb of Vladek and Anja, a statement of the later –and eternal– present, and is the last image of the book as well (Plate 2.5). Right before his end, Artie's father has replaced him with his ghost brother. With his last words, Vladek confirms what had been long a suspicion in Artie's mind, that 'Richieu is aligned with Anja and Vladek because of their common experiences, leaving [him] firmly at the bottom of the family order'.⁸⁸ And with that, his whole family rejoins in the realm of the dead, living him once again a permanent outsider.

A couple of pages before the end of the novel, we come across the last photographic intervention. The reader is presented with a photograph of Vladek wearing the apparel of the concentration camp, which serves to trigger the same emotional reaction as the picture of Richieu has previously, the realisation that the story refers to actual human beings and not to fictional morphemes of only artistic significance. Once again, the use of the photograph within the graphic novel offers us a pause, a momentary halt in the plot. Photography, being a different medium, works here as a visual shock, serving the purpose of stopping all development to introduce a cold chill in the narration, the psychological impact of the understanding that on this panel there is no moving forward, no progression. 'The subject is dead, but forever there, present. The time exposure is always haunted by the past, by remembrance, by a work of mourning'.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Spiegelman, *The Complete Maus*. p. 296.

⁸⁸ Victoria A. Elmwood, "'Happy, Happy Ever After': The Transformation of Trauma between the Generations in Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*," *Biography* 27, no. 4 (Fall 2004). p. 703.

⁸⁹ Mary Ann Doane, "Real Time: Instantaneity and the Photographic Imaginary" in Joanna Lowry and David Green, *Stillness and Time : Photography and the Moving Image* (Brighton: Photoworks, 2006).



PLATE 2.5: *The Complete Maus*, p. 296

Art Spiegelman admits to the importance of this particular photograph for his work:

The photo that I needed to have most specifically –in the book I even talk about “I need to have that photo, you’ve gotta find that photo”– was the one that Vladek had as a “souvenir” of his time in the camps. I knew how important this was to the entire project, and I knew that placing it was important. It had to come somewhere after other things had happened in the book. By the time one nears that point in the narrative, one already has a very clear picture of who Vladek is, even though one hasn’t a clue as

to what he looks like. And what became so interesting to me was the photo –the thing that gives you that “objective correlative” tells you so insanely little. The fact that it’s a posed photo, after the fact that he’s donning a costume version of his uniform... [...] So to be left with a photo that tells you something, but only in relation to the drawn and written telling around it, informs what you thought you knew by making you re-examine it.⁹⁰

Approaching the end of the war, the year 1944 finds Vladek in Auschwitz, struggling to survive in cruel conditions.

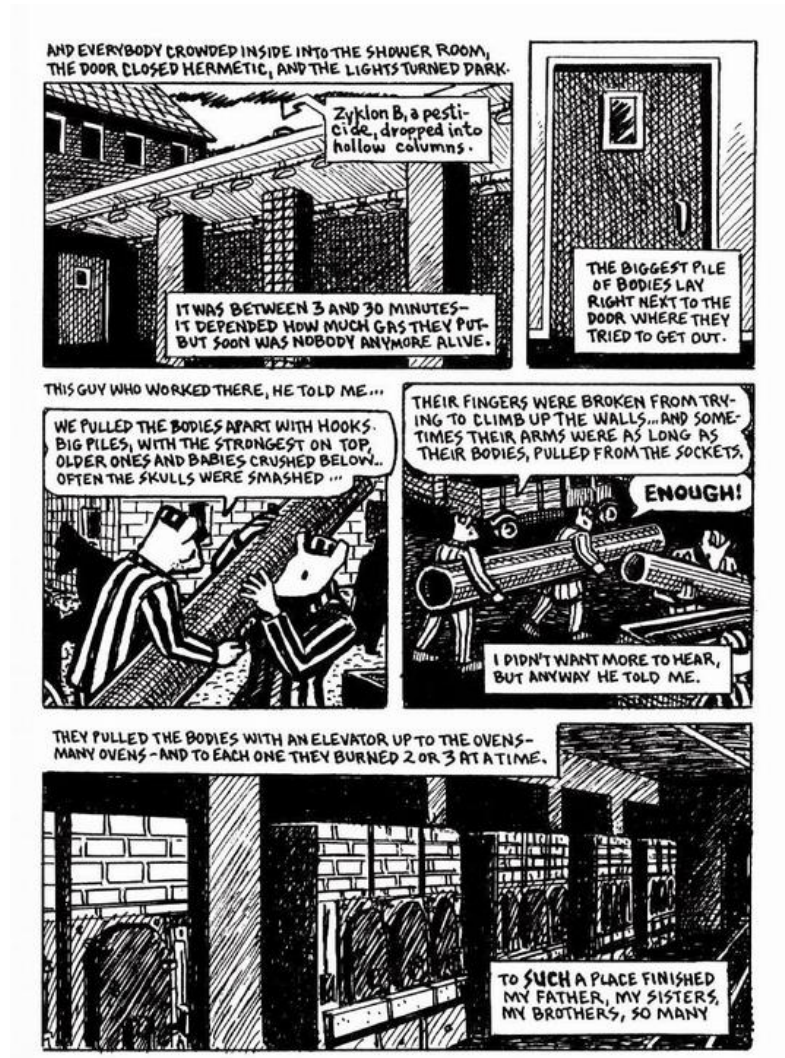


PLATE 2.6: *The Complete Maus*, p. 230

⁹⁰ Art Spiegelman, *Metamaus : Art Spiegelman Looks inside His Modern Classic, Maus* (London: Viking, 2011). p. 220.

In November, as the Red Army advances towards the concentration camp and the outcome of the war seems to have been decided, Himmler sends orders for the camp to be demolished, all traces of the gas chambers and crematoria to be erased and the remaining prisoners to be deported to inland Germany to be dealt with. Since April, more than five hundred thousand Jews had been deported to Auschwitz, including the masses of Hungarian Jews that exceeded the capacity of the crematoria. Around this time Vladek is sent to work in the Crematorium II facilities: ‘Special prisoners worked here separate. They got better bread, but each few months they also were sent up the chimney’.⁹¹

Vladek gives his account as an eyewitness of the cremating installations and Spiegelman illustrates this account merely with clinical sketches of what his father describes: a drawing of the landscape, completely lifeless, as if it was already abandoned –already dead, and how could it avoid the smell of death with all the atrocities conducted within it; a ground plan of the building; view of the empty dressing room; room of the gas chamber and finally the closed door behind which millions of people met their end. None of them are presented here, while the descriptions by the father are given as an off-panel narration over the bleak visuals.

Vladek hears from a co-worker, the terrifying retelling of the atrocities taking place there:

The biggest pile of bodies lay right next to the door where they tried to get out. This guy who worked there, he told me... “We pulled the bodies apart with hooks. Big piles, with the strongest on top, older ones and babies crushed below... often the skulls were smashed... their fingers broken from trying to climb up the walls... and sometimes their arms were as long as their bodies, pulled from the sockets”. Enough. I didn’t want anymore to hear, but

⁹¹ Spiegelman, *The Complete Maus*. p. 230.

anyway he told me [...] To such a place finished my father, my sisters, my brothers, so many.⁹² (Plate 2.6)

Contrary to the emotional power of the text, the drawing is cold and detached, a result of the absence of visual reference to the human objects mentioned in the textual narration. This combination of the clinical drawing and the earnest linguistic description demands an intense response from the reader. In later panels, Vladek is picked along with his companion to work for the disassembling of the equipment of the death chambers while he is made aware of the huge holes that had been dug up in the ground when upon the arrival of the Hungarian Jews the crematoria could not suffice for the annihilation of all the corpses:

The holes were big, so like the swimming pool of the Pines Hotel here. And train after train of Hungarians came. And those what finished in the gas chambers before they got pushed in these graves, it was the lucky ones. The others had to jump in the graves while still they were alive... Prisoners that worked there poured gasoline over the live ones and the dead ones. And the fat from the burning bodies they scooped and poured again so everyone could burn better.⁹³

During this paragraph there is a transition in the design. Up until now we have been shown Vladek and his companion working solely on the demolition of Auschwitz. When this paragraph starts, [‘The holes were big, so like the swimming pool of the Pines Hotel here. And train after train of Hungarians came’] is said by the father in a balloon speech, in a small square panel located in the present of Artie’s narration. The panel next to it, a somewhat longer rectangle, shows from the distance the prisoners throwing bodies onto the piles while even further in the background some dim figures pour gasoline over the dead [‘And those what finished in the gas chambers before they got pushed in these graves, it was the lucky ones. The others had to jump in the graves while

⁹² Ibid. p. 231.

⁹³ Ibid. p. 232.

still they were alive...’]. The last panel of the page (and last of this section of the narration regarding Auschwitz), is significantly different from the previous sequence. It is a long and narrow rectangle, showing the Jews being burned alive. The point of view is from within the pit and very closely focused to the agonising heads of the mice encircled by the atrocious blazes that consumed them.

The expressionist presentation of this infernal scene –the screaming muzzles aligned with the jets of fire, mouths wide open with two distinct mice teeth and eyes perfectly round, with dilated pupils that reveal the terror, horror and pain experienced– is made even more piercing by comparison to the previous scenes, making the words accompanying it [‘Prisoners that worked there poured gasoline over the live ones and the dead ones. And the fat from the burning bodies they scooped and poured again so everyone could burn better’] even more gruesome (Plate 2.7). I would suggest that the outcome of the scene is the establishment of fear, dread and horror with a universal effect upon the recipient of the narration with reminiscences of hell and eternal damnation. The descriptions of this and such situations had a devastating effect during the war.



PLATE 2.7: *The Complete Maus*, p. 231 (detail)

The atrocities were so horrendous that their nightmarishness could not be properly apprehended. This disbelief is to some extent the reason why the Jewish population did not try to rebel against the fate that was imposed upon them by their oppressors. According to Lucy Dawidowicz:

Apprehension, anxiety and foreboding gripped the Jews who were to be “resettled” and no less those who remained behind in their prison ghettos. In a short time apprehension turned into overpowering terror, when it seemed that the Jews who were taken away had been engulfed in a void. They had disappeared from the face of the earth. That the Germans were transporting the Jews from the ghettos of Poland to some mysterious location just in order to murder them was an idea altogether too monstrous to be credible, too bizarre for plausibility.⁹⁴

It is as if the extremity of the event, the extent of the degradation was such that the Jewish population could not conflate these reports with analytical thinking. Thus, they could receive the news, could understand the situation, but could not go to the next step and associate this situation with themselves and the threat this comprised for their individual existence and their communities. Indeed, as Shoshana Felman notes, ‘any rational analysis of the situation would have shown that the Nazi aim was the destruction of all Jews. But the psychological pressures militated against rational analysis and created an atmosphere in which wishful thinking seemed to offer the only antidote to utter despair’.⁹⁵ The consequence was that despite the macabre information coming from all sides, the majority of European Jews were passively driven to the slaughter. Despite all evidence ‘many succumbed to wishful thinking, believed the German promises about resettlement and fantasized about some distant

⁹⁴ Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *A Holocaust Reader*, Library of Jewish Studies (New York: Behrman House, 1976). p. 289

⁹⁵ *Felman and Laub, Testimony : Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. pp. 103-104.

place where, however wretched their circumstances, they might continue to live with their families.

The denial of unacceptable truth was the one means available to ghetto Jews to make their situation bearable'.⁹⁶ This means that the impact of terror was so devastating it deprived these people of their survival instinct. Or, according to Bettelheim 'since so many Jews did not fight, no one fought for them. [...] ...the majority stayed and died because they clung on an antiquated notion of reality',⁹⁷ namely ghetto thinking. This truth is hard to deal with retrospectively, once it has been realised, and for the second generation even more so. Marianne Hirsch in an essay on Holocaust photographs introduces the term of postmemory, 'the response of the second generation to the trauma of the first'.⁹⁸ Spiegelman's novel is a practice of postmemory, an interpretation, representation and struggle to ascribe meaning to the history that shaped his life without ever giving him the chance to make a difference. Hirsch, as a representative of this second generation argues that 'repetition does not have the effect of desensitizing us to horror, or shielding us from shock, thus demanding an endless escalation of disturbing imagery, as the first generation might fear. On the contrary, compulsive and traumatic repetition connects the second generation to the first, *producing* rather than *screening* the effect of trauma that was lived so much more directly as *compulsive repetition* by survivors and contemporary witnesses'.⁹⁹

By creating *Maus*, staging Vladek's experience and re-directing Artie's encounters with his father, Spiegelman speaks the language of the trauma, in psychoanalytic terms he "acts-out" on paper the inherited pain of the Holocaust. His choice of medium is of importance, since the story is not conveyed in words alone or imprinted on film, but it is concocted from scratch; even the language in which the story is being told is created along the way, for the visual language is never fixed but changes on the go, following the needs of its subject, the characters and the creator. Thus, the forceful narration of Vladek's experience during the war is largely a result of the power of the

⁹⁶ Dawidowicz, *A Holocaust Reader*. p. 290.

⁹⁷ Bruno Bettelheim, *Recollections and Reflections* (London: Penguin Books, 1992). pp. 263-267.

⁹⁸ Marianne Hirsch, "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 14, no. 1 (2001). p. 8.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.* pp. 8-9.

medium and its ability to combine text, perceived as speech, and various visual elements. With the use of actual photographs in the narration, Spiegelman turns this visual language to something more complicated, making those ‘photographic incidents’ little shocks for the reader, and loading them with significance which passes into the rest of the narration once it has been interpreted.

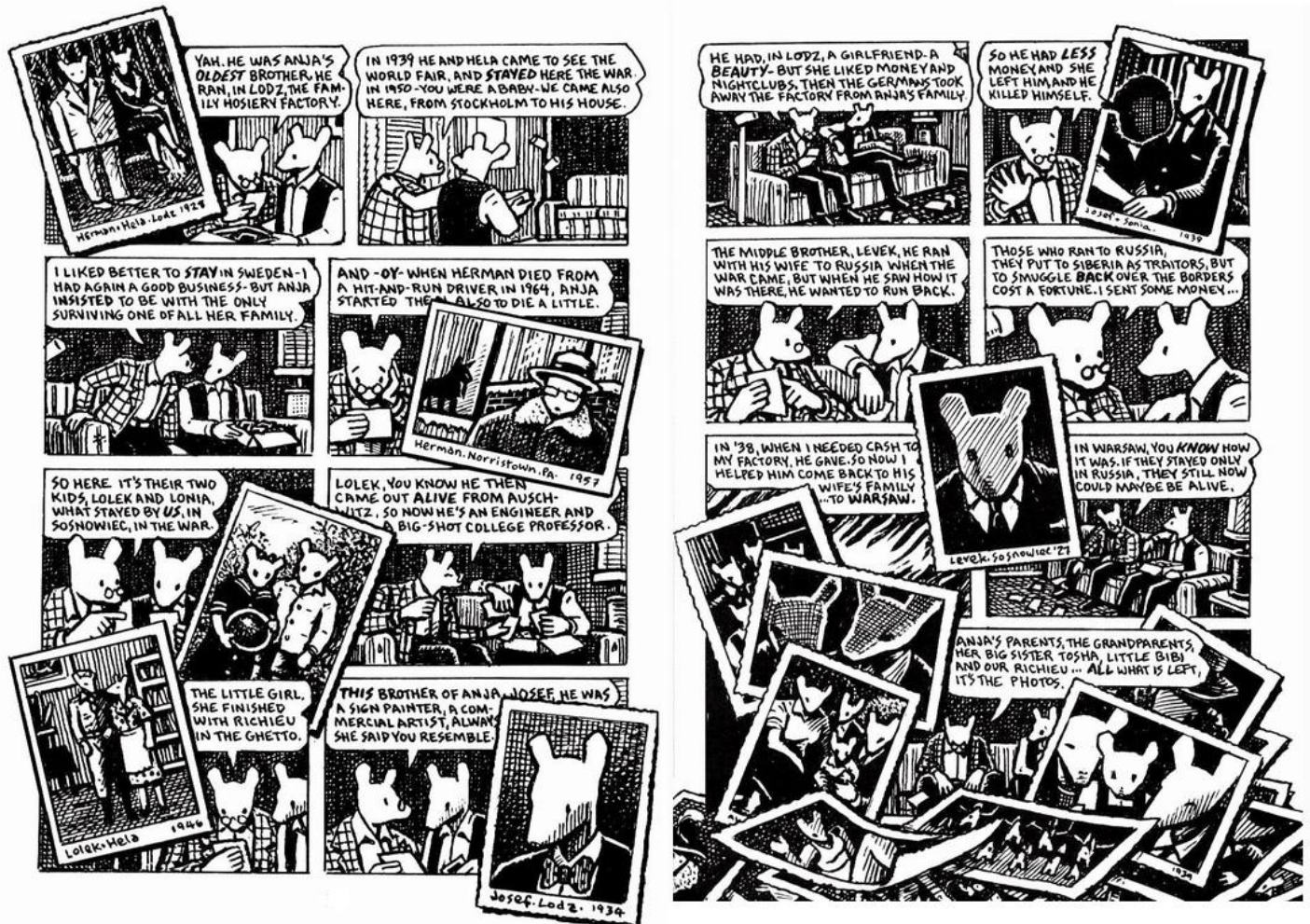


PLATE 2.8: *The Complete Maus*, pp. 274-275

In the penultimate chapter of *Maus*, Vladek presents to his son the most valuable thing salvaged from his pre-war life (Plate 2.8). A box with “snapshots” from a life long demolished and of people long lost. The scene where father and son look at the photographs of the mother’s side of the family occupies two facing pages. Unlike other instances in the novel, these “photographs” are not the actual snapshots but drawn in the same fashion as the rest of the comic is. This introduction of the element of photographic

picture in the narration is another careful construction to depict and evoke deep human emotions about loss, nostalgia, regret and pain. Throughout the two facing pages not less than ten “photographs” are presented, as having been carelessly thrown over the comic’s panels. In the bottom of the second page these “photos” get crowded and pile up, build over the actual panel, leaving only a small space for the speech balloon carrying Vladek’s grievance ‘Anja’s parents, the grandparents, her big sister Tosha, little Bibi, and our Richieu... All that is left, it’s the photos’.¹⁰⁰

These drawn photos underlie the significance of the tragedy. They introduce in the narratability of the comics medium the stillness and fragmentation that they carry. These pictures do not actively tell a story but signify the stories that stopped, that could not be narrated because of the lives that ended so suddenly. They represent random moments in time, 1927, 1928, 1934, 1939, carefully labelled, carefully preserved, the only testimony left from an entirely different world, a prelapsarian situation in which they can never return. ‘These photos we got from Richieu’s Polish governess. We gave her our valuable things to hold until the war is over. But afterwards she said. “All these valuables, the Nazis grabbed away”. We didn’t believe, but the pictures at least, she gave back’.¹⁰¹ From Vladek’s side of the family there is nothing left. In the set of pages following the aforementioned there is only one picture from 1963, Vladek’s survivor brother: ‘So only my little brother, Pinek, came out from the war alive... From the rest of my family, it’s nothing left, not even a snapshot’. It’s hard to tell whether the existence or the absence of snapshots is more painful. Speaking about the effects of photographic documents on the present viewer, Hirsch suggests that:

These photos –even the images of survivors, even the prewar images– are not about death but about genocidal murder. They resist the work of mourning. They make it difficult to go back to a moment before death, or to recognize survival. They cannot be redeemed by irony, insight, or understanding. They can only be confronted again and again, with the same pain, the same

¹⁰⁰ Spiegelman, *The Complete Maus*. p.275.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.* p. 276.

incomprehension, the same distortion of the look, the same mortification. And thus, in their repetition, they no longer *represent* Nazi genocide, but they *provoke* the traumatic effect that this history has had on all those who grew up under its shadow.¹⁰²

But what do Vladek's pictures represent? They are real family pictures, but in a sense they are not, as, unlike the previous occasions they are being drawn as part of the drawing, instead of presenting them raw. And still they fill the page, they flood the page space and dominate the view; without actually showing an objective moment they carry all the bitterness, the reminiscence of the genocide, the terrible plight that came to strike the millions of European Jews (and not only Jews) sending most of them to death and the vast majority of the rest into exile. Spiegelman admits to have used the sequence of these photos on purpose:

[I]t's a way to understand the destinies of other people in my immediate family in an encapsulated manner. Going over these photos laid out over the page allows for rather telegraphic, but efficient information about brothers, uncles, whatever. [...] But the accumulation of the photos becomes something. On page 257 there is a pile-up of photos at the bottom of the page that somehow refers back to the pile of bodies as it bleeds off the page. The pile of anonymous pictures.¹⁰³

The same pile of photographs works as an immediate contradiction to Vladek's family of whom there are no photographs left. Not even this faint reminder of the time before war. His family vanquished from land and memory. In *Meta-Maus* we are presented with a branch of the Spiegelman family tree. From the families of ten siblings, a total of eighty-three people (including spouses and children) only thirteen made it to the end of the war and past. From the rest there is not even a snapshot left. There is no document that they ever existed, they have been liquidated from history. Spiegelman cannot even pay tribute to

¹⁰² Hirsch, "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory." p. 28.

¹⁰³ Spiegelman, *Metamaus : Art Spiegelman Looks inside His Modern Classic, Maus*. p. 222.

this side of his family, as he has done to his mother's side, by making them part of his story: 'After addressing the destiny of Anja's family I had to find a way of talking about Vladek's side of the family without even photos to hold that place. So Vladek's body has to hold that place on page 276. [...]. Vladek's body had to stand in for all of the bodies that didn't make it into the then-present'.¹⁰⁴

The trauma continues to affect the following generations, who need to discuss the trauma, in order to express *their* pain. Unlike the introvert and withdrawn survivors, they need to make sense of what happened, how it happened and how it can never be allowed to happen again. The comics medium has been used in *Maus* as an attempt to retrieve Vladek's story, save it from oblivion and is experienced by the author/narrator as an escape from silence. The story of Auschwitz which was Vladek's story had been Artie's shadow story as well, a story which followed him and dictated to his present without actually being *his* past. Sketching out this story, panel by panel with him as the 'narrative facilitator provides a means by which he narrates himself into the family legacy without appropriating the experience of the Holocaust as his own'.¹⁰⁵ He can now rejoin Anja and Vladek, even Richieu, find himself in the same *space* where they were, despite the fact that they no longer are.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. p. 224.

¹⁰⁵ Elmwood, "'Happy, Happy Ever After': The Transformation of Trauma between the Generations in Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*." p. 691.

CHAPTER THREE

Epileptic: A Visual Pathography

Moving on from a major historical trauma, the current chapter is about the work of a French comics artist, David B., and his autobiographical novel *Epileptic* which is the presentation of a graphic pathography, a book focused around the author's older brother's epilepsy that disrupted family life, starting in the 1960s and continuing indefinitely. With reference to *Epileptic* I shall be looking into presentations of the disease, the impact of (the view of) the mentally and physically impaired in the composition of personality and how illness becomes a part of identity as presented through the graphic medium. *Epileptic* tells how illness intrudes in the life of the afflicted and their family, and how it alters their perspective on life, their identity and their family's dynamics. This family drama structures the novel, every frame is a representation of the epic battle taking place both within the family and within its individual members, all due to the destructive presence of epilepsy.

According to Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, '[a] disintegrating body may threaten the very possibility of narration. Like time, the act of telling is considered a defining characteristic of narrative. Texts that struggle with its disturbance invite both a challenge and an expansion of the category of "narration"'.¹⁰⁶ The word "pathos" is the key notion of the narration of illness; defined as 'the emotionally moving quality or power of a literary work or of particular passages within it, appealing especially to our feelings of sorrow, pity, and compassionate sympathy',¹⁰⁷ "pathos" derives from the Greek *πάθος* which is the dynamic representation of psychic turbulence, ardour and intensity, a manifestation of love and hate, indulgence and weakness. "Pathography" is a term descriptively appropriate for literary criticism being 'a study of the life of an individual or the history of a community with regard to

¹⁰⁶ Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, "What Can Narrative Theory Learn from Illness Narratives?," *Literature and Medicine* 25, no. 2 (2006). pp. 241-254.

¹⁰⁷ "pathos": C. Baldick, *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008. *Oxford Reference Online*. Oxford University Press. University of York. 27 May 2010 <http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t56.e853>.

the influence of a particular disease or psychological disorder',¹⁰⁸ and it has been adopted to describe a sub-genre of biography, the memoirs of the illness experience.¹⁰⁹ The word is first found in 1848 in Robley Dunglison's *Medical Lexicon: A Dictionary of Medical Science* as the description of disease.¹¹⁰ It appears with its current meaning as '[t]he study of the life of an individual or the history of a community with regard to the influence of a particular disease or disorder; (as a count noun) a study or biography of this kind'¹¹¹ in 1917 in Oskar Pfister's *The Psychoanalytic Method*. The literal translation of the composite word from its Greek components is "a piece of writing about pathos" (pathos as analysed above). When these concepts are considered in their linguistic and etymological importance, the term "pathography" acquires more meaning in the literary analysis of texts and even more in the case of the graphic medium (it is particularly interesting to include the word "graphic" into the pathography as well).

The narration of illness in any form (fictional or biographical), is directly related to the kind of the illness in question. The particularities of the narrated illness, the pathology as such, modulates the narration and the story structure. Pathology dictates the course of the story, it shapes the plot and carves the characters into the likeness of the illness; the symptoms of different conditions produce different situations, different patients, different mentalities and different narratives. These varied forms are structured in accordance with the medical and cultural subtext each condition carries through history, as well as with the objective somatic and psychological effect the symptoms have on the patient. Accordingly, physical illness and psychological state are intertwined and, under certain circumstances, cannot be differentiated.

After her experience with cancer, Susan Sontag composed an intense autopathographical essay titled *Illness as Metaphor* (written and published in 1978) where she discusses how the illness becomes part of you, becomes you:

¹⁰⁸ "pathography n." *The New Oxford American Dictionary*, second edition. E. McKean (ed) Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005. *Oxford Reference Online*. Oxford University Press. University of York. 27 May 2010 <<http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t183.e56870>>

¹⁰⁹ John Wiltshire, "Biography, Pathography and the Recovery of Meaning," *The Cambridge Quarterly* 29, no. 4 (2000).p. 409.

¹¹⁰ "pathography, n." OED Online. September 2013. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/138798?redirectedFrom=pathography&> (accessed November 20, 2013).

¹¹¹ Ibid.

‘[i]llness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship;’¹¹² According to Sontag, illness is time and space, it is a state of being, not only something that defines you, but also something that grows to be inseparable from yourself, imposing a citizenship which comes with a one-way ticket to the land of the sick.

David B’s graphic novel, *Epileptic* is the biographical pathography of the author’s struggle from a young age to live with the burden of his brother’s epilepsy. Furthermore, it is the story of the family and their failure to cope with their older son’s illness in the years after his diagnosis. Jean-Christophe’s condition becomes increasingly severe, driving the family from conventional medicine and psychology to alternative treatments such as macrobiotic diet, acupuncture, spiritualism and psychics. The early lives of the three children, (the suffering Jean-Christophe, Pierre-François, the author, who later changed his own name to David B. and their younger sister Florence) are permanently disrupted by the illness. Their childhood cannot be remembered as anything else but a huge struggle with the monster of epilepsy. The drama of their brother’s illness determines their future.

Epilepsy is a disease travelling through time, known since antiquity, and bringing with it a variety of metaphors and meanings. It has been called sacred and has been treated as such; there have been cultures where the epileptic is regarded as highly gifted or somehow in communication with the sacred and spirits from a different dimension.¹¹³ As with any serious disease in the course of history, from the plague to AIDS, from leprosy to cancer and from tuberculosis to syphilis, epilepsy has acquired a cultural significance over and above its actual, physical symptoms.

In ancient Greece, Hippocrates was the first to put forth a sceptical overview of the disease:

It is thus with regard to the disease called Sacred: it appears to me to be no wise more divine nor more sacred than other diseases, but has a natural cause from which it

¹¹² Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor, [and] Aids and Its Metaphors* (Harmondsworth,: Penguin, 1991). p. 3.

¹¹³ Anne Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down : A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997).

originates like other affections. Man regards its nature and cause as divine from ignorance and wonder, because it is not at all like other diseases. And this notion of its divinity is kept up by their inability to comprehend it and the simplicity of the mode by which it is cured, for men are freed from it by purifications and incantations. But if it is reckoned divine because it is wonderful, instead of one there are many diseases which would be sacred; for, as I will show, there are others no less wonderful and prodigious, which nobody imagines to be sacred.¹¹⁴

However this composed opinion did not prevail through the centuries. Epilepsy was considered divine or sacred both in the ancient world and in modern tribal cultures, but has been regarded as demonic in the Christian world as well as in other traditions.¹¹⁵ In contemporary societies it is still an awkward encounter, as Graham Scambler writes:

It could be said that the person with epilepsy in contemporary societies like Britain and the US possesses an ontological deficit. It is not that such a person stands condemned for some kind of wrongdoing –there is no moral culpability– but rather that he or she is an imperfect being.¹¹⁶

Furthermore, the epileptic in modern societies is alarming. They are unpredictable individuals in a world deemed to be perfectly programmed, ‘the individual with epilepsy differs from someone with say, cerebral palsy in that the latter’s loss of motor control is constant (and therefore predictable) and

¹¹⁴ Cited in Eric J. Cassell, "Illness and Disease," *The Hastings Center Report* 6, no. 2 (1976). p.29.

¹¹⁵ Yoram Bilu, "The Moroccan Demon in Israel: The Case Of "Evil Spirit Disease"," *Ethos* 8, no. 1 (1980).

¹¹⁶ Graham Scambler, *Epilepsy, The Experience of Illness* (London,: Tavistock/Routledge, 1989). p. 49.

mild',¹¹⁷ as a result 'people with epilepsy threaten the social order by causing [...] ambiguity in social interaction'.¹¹⁸

For this and other reasons, epilepsy is not merely a somatic disease, but is closely associated with the cultural environment. In addition to this, the social reactions to epilepsy affect how the sufferer and their family perceive the very experience of the illness. In 1928, Freud undertook to present an interpretation of Fyodor Dostoevsky's epilepsy as a manifestation of parricidal desires. Even though Freud could not possibly have physically treated Dostoevsky's condition due to territorial and temporal distance, he attempts to posthumously diagnose him with a severe neurosis (instead of epilepsy), an attempt which without holding medical credit, gives a theoretical insight into how the illness is associated with psychological dysfunctions. Freud points out that 'neurosis is after all only a sign that the ego has not succeeded in making a synthesis, that in attempting to do so it has forfeited its unity'.¹¹⁹ As Dennis Patrick Slattery writes:

The fiction lies in the disease rather than the disease in the fiction and thus provides the motive or intention that gives shape to fictive time and space. The disease sets the beat of the narrative pulse and takes on a voice of its own in the story that is told. The disease has its own story to tell.¹²⁰

This idea, that the disease is narrating its own story, or more accurately that its impact is so strong that it shapes the story entirely, is widely manifested in the case of *Epileptic*, where the disease is part of the story, is the building material of the story, is in a sense the story itself; it structures the plot and carves the characters into its likeness. Freud's Dostoyevsky essay makes the connection between psychoanalysis and pathography, showing how psychoanalysis can

¹¹⁷ Ibid. pp. 47-48.

¹¹⁸ Ibid. p. 50.

¹¹⁹ Sigmund Freud et al., *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1981). Volume 21. p. 179.

¹²⁰ Dennis Patrick Slattery, "Seized by the Muse: Dostoevsky's Convulsive Poetics in *the Idiot*," *Literature and Medicine* 18, no. 1 (1999). p. 61.

assist in our attempts to make sense of distressing situations loaded with cultural significance.

Epilepsy is not merely a disease. Scambler argues that epilepsy is rather a symptom, or a series of symptoms, rather than a disease: ‘An epileptic seizure is the product of an abnormal paroxysmal discharge of cerebral neurons, and epilepsy itself is sometimes defined as a continuing tendency to epileptic seizures’.¹²¹ When talking about epilepsy, even merely about the symptomatology, there is no stability, no pattern, nothing to hold onto as steady and permanent. The epileptic is a person defined by their illness, formed and shaped by its particularities and restricted by its limitations. They cannot drive, they cannot participate in certain sports, random programs on the television can trigger a seizure, epileptics are held in captivity by their condition and yet this condition is elusive, temporary, intermittent, although the restrictions are ever-present. Slattery writes that epilepsy can be granted ‘some autonomy as a creative force’, and that diseases regardless of their symptomatology and their physiological manifestations ‘are also culturally shaped and adapted to the mythos prevailing at a particular place and time’. He concludes: ‘As mythic constructions, they may serve to articulate particular ideas, values and notions about the mysterious relationship between psyche and soma’.¹²² According to Sontag ‘[d]isease is what speaks through the body, a language for dramatizing the mental: a form of self-expression’,¹²³ which she proved by making her experience into theory, putting her cancer into her essay, writing something so passionate and feverish that she would not have been able to compose if her opinion had not been shaped by her illness.

The opening page of *Epileptic* takes place in a bathroom (Plate 3.1). It is 1994 and the narrator is brushing his teeth when his epileptic brother walks in; this is the moment he realises the phenomenal capacity of his brother’s illness to destroy. His brother inhabits a ravaged, ruined soma. He has lost his front teeth and ‘there are scars all over his body. His eyebrows are criss-crossed by scars. The back of his head is bald, from all the times he’s fallen. He’s enormously bloated from medication and lack of exercise.’¹²⁴

¹²¹ Scambler, *Epilepsy*. p. 1.

¹²² Slattery, "Seized by the Muse: Dostoevsky's Convulsive Poetics in *the Idiot*." pp. 60-61.

¹²³ Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor, [and] Aids and Its Metaphors*. p. 45.

¹²⁴ David B., *Epileptic* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005). p. 1.

It has taken only one page to demonstrate the outcome of the story that is about to begin. The graphic novel commences in an unorthodox way on two facing pages. The second page is set in 1964, with the first panel showing three lively, healthy children aged seven, five and four. This creates a strong visual juxtaposition of a child's health with the results of the illness, before the novel has begun to broach the subject. The antithesis between the evidently ill adult and the unsuspecting child on the facing page is a stark visual shock with which to begin, encapsulating the entire trauma that the family will have suffered in thirty years.



PLATE 3.1: *Epileptic*, p.1

The introductory pages refer to a time before epilepsy, when the family was untouched by the illness that is to befall them and alter their anticipated future in the most unpredictable way. The three children, Jean-Christophe, Pierre-François and Florence grow up in a middleclass neighbourhood of Orléans. They day-dream, explore and fight; they tie up their little sister, Florence and try to set her on fire while pretending she is Joan of Arc. However, besides the typical childhood presented there, something hurtful is lurking within their fantasy world. Pierre-François, the younger brother and narrator of the story describes the “nightly typhoons” that visit his sleeping mind:

At night, the typhoons come for me. I fall asleep and in the middle of the night, I am carried off by whirlwinds. And I find myself lost somewhere in my room, which has expanded during my sleep. I walk for kilometres, feeling my way along a wall without ever coming across anything familiar. I call out to Florence, who sleeps in the next room. She opens the door, I have a point of reference, and I find my way back to bed. I’m assaulted by those nightly typhoons a number of times. And then it just stops.¹²⁵

(Plate 3.2)

The typhoon, located in the narration before epilepsy has appeared is nonetheless an omen for what is to follow. Not an omen in deterministic or supernatural terms, but in terms of psychic operation; it may be functioning as a retrospective psychoanalytic construction, a memory that has been rewritten and replaced, retroactively becoming the first perception of the brother’s epilepsy and a device to understand by getting into the brother’s shoes, even when this takes place in the land of fantasy, the dreaming. A few pages later, the older brother, Jean-Christophe fits for the first time while playing with his siblings. The same night the childish voice of the narrator explores what has happened to his brother: ‘He got carried away by a typhoon. I am sure of it!

¹²⁵ Ibid. p. 4.

But that's bizarre! I didn't think typhoons came around in the daytime! From now on I've gotta be really careful'.¹²⁶



PLATE 3.2: *Epileptic*, p. 4 (detail)

Thus, the typhoons are immediately and directly associated with the brother's epilepsy. Going back to the graphic representation of the typhoon, in the five panels demonstrating it we see and feel a swirling sense of being carried away and being lost. The child is twirled by the imaginary typhoon and then left alone in an entirely black space, afterwards struggling to find his way through darkness to return to his bed only to discover that the typhoon is still there, with its pervasive spirals still in action. The next panel is a conversation between the two brothers. 'Last night I was carried away by a typhoon', says Pierre-François. 'Me too!', responds Jean-Christophe, making it clear that the underlying threat of epilepsy had been present in the family before its

¹²⁶ Ibid. p. 9.

manifested onset; or more accurately, is retrospectively redefining the family history; for them, there is no “time before epilepsy”.



PLATE 3.3: *Epileptic*, p. 8 (detail)

After the first seizure (Plate 3.3), the family’s ordeal begins. This is shown in a large panel where Jean-Christophe and his parents are trapped in the middle of a circle comprised of malevolent-looking doctors and specialists. This enclosing ring of professionals, each offering succour and salvation, foreshadows the fate of the family, bound in a vicious cycle of doctors, quacks and gurus. This image of the dancing circle is graphically similar to the idea of the typhoon, an uncontrollable threat which will consume them all, will misdirect them and destroy their integrity as a family. The heavy atmosphere created by this uncertainty has dire consequences for the development of the younger siblings’ mentalities and it is reflected in their adult lives. The disease is the motive force both for plot and character development.

Demonstrated through *Epileptic*’s distinctive art this malaise bears down on every situation, trapping Jean-Christophe and his family in a

repetitive loop of grinding hopelessness. In *Epileptic* complex visual representations are employed to depict familiar circumstances; an artistic construction that consists of real-life, monsters and occultism; a truly nightmarish narration. Indeed the drawings of David B. are detailed and complicated, full of thin lines, more like a woodcarving on the paper than drawing. Unlike *Maus*'s minimal design, David B. opts for a more complex drawing style, expressing his story in full detail and graphic hyperbole. The autobiography presented in *Epileptic* is an autobiography as a whole: every little component of the narration, structure and material of the book is a testimony of this troubled childhood.

Epilepsy is presented as an illness as well as a cultural artefact. It has been plumed with superstitions, folk tales, a cultural burden constantly laid on the shoulders of the sufferer. Jean-Christophe's epilepsy is typical of the legendary, culturally-loaded epilepsy that had received the status of the "sacred disease", which brings into the familial environment not only the disruption caused by the mere existence of a serious illness, but all the paraphernalia of its unique cultural and historical value. Epilepsy has intruded in the family like a violent invader, and has tipped over all balance. It has come to set new rules and impose a new order. It is epilepsy now predominating over the family, it is because and for epilepsy that all decisions are taken, that any schedule is made. The family will move into a new house, will start a new diet, a new way of life, everything will change in order to accommodate epilepsy.

The intrusion of epilepsy constitutes a major trauma for the family too; nothing is for them to decide anymore, they are powerless in the face of the illness. The idea of intrusion is presented in the story before the onset of the epilepsy. The boys and their friends are playing in a deserted warehouse when Pierre-François is caught by the warehouse manager and locked away in a dark room. Panicked and terrified, the little boy breaks a window with his forearm and runs away, to the safety of his home. The next day, somebody visits the family house. Drawn in a long rectangular panel, on the top left of the page, the sinister figure of the warehouse manager appears, stern, hunching and threatening. Pierre-François is drawn as a tiny little weakling about to be crushed under the manager's enormous shoe.

After this initial image of horror, the manager explains his presence: 'I'm here to apologize to you for what happened yesterday' (Plate 3.4). And

Pierre-François recalls: 'He leaves immediately. My brother lured me into a trap and my parents let the monster into the house'.¹²⁷ The sense of familial security has been breached, and this can be the cause of an everlasting fear. A dread of not being able to find shelter: if the true, uncontested guardians are willing to allow the terrifying into the house (the internal child makes no distinction between assault and apology) then evil can be found everywhere. Furthermore, who, if not the parents, has allowed epilepsy to dominate in their family? On all aspects, either one is willing to irrationally consider the sick child as a faulty creation of the parents, or to assume that their dealing with his situation was traumatising for their other children. In both cases this is seen as permanently wrong: it is and always will be the parents' fault for allowing the monster into the house. On the bottom right panel of the page, the tragedy of epilepsy begins for real. Jean-Christophe has his first seizure while seated on a still motorbike. He declines towards the wall in the same angle and direction that the warehouse manager had been lurking towards Pierre-François earlier on the same page. The monster of epilepsy has entered their household and it is the older brother who brought it home.

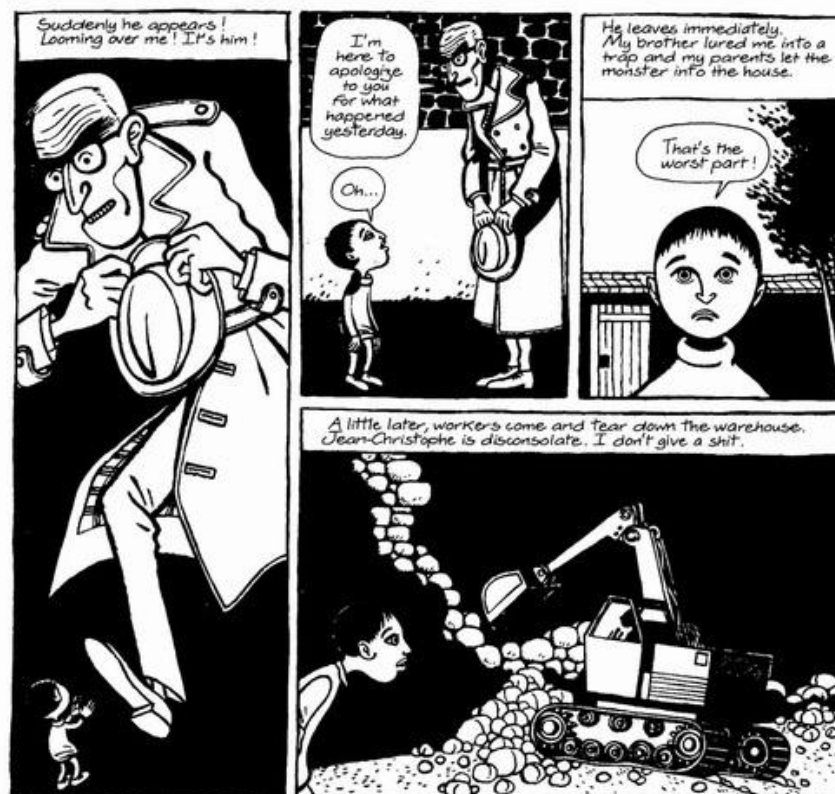


PLATE 3.4: *Epileptic*, p. 8 (detail)

¹²⁷ Ibid. p. 8.

Like in *Epileptic* each of the novels presented in this thesis is an example of the negotiation of trauma. A structured narration is one of the primary methods of dealing with of trauma. As Leigh Gilmore suggests:

Survivors of trauma are urged to testify repeatedly to their trauma in an effort to create the language that will manifest and contain trauma as well as the witnesses who will recognize it. Thus the unconscious language of repetition through which trauma initially speaks (flashbacks, nightmares, emotional flooding) is replaced by a conscious language that can be repeated in structured settings.¹²⁸

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder theories classify under the term “trauma” events as harsh as the experience of war, assault, or rape. Other factors of everyday life are perceived as sources of stress, but according to the bibliography they do not constitute strong enough reasons to cause significant trauma.

Psychoanalysis however is a lot more sympathetic towards aspects of the everyday that can be hurtful enough to cause trauma, particularly when repeated, or when they take up such an important part of someone’s life, enough to render them helpless. Just a brief example from the psychoanalytic history: when Freud first announced his “seduction theory” in *Studies in Hysteria*, he suggested that the source of the neurosis lies in some sexual trauma that occurred before puberty, some incident of real sexual abuse. He maintained this theory from 1895 until 1897.¹²⁹ Soon, however, Freud started to doubt this initial theory which after 1897 he modified as he reached the conclusion that the traumatic seduction scene was in part imaginary, fabricated in order to support the neurosis; as a result ‘the question remains pretty much an open one because in many cases it is difficult –for both patient and

¹²⁸ Leigh Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography : Trauma and Testimony* (Ithaca, N.Y. ; London: Cornell University Press, 2001). p. 7.

¹²⁹ Jean-Michel Quinodoz, *Reading Freud: A Chronological Exploration of Freud's Writings* (London: Routledge, 2005). p. 18.

psychoanalyst– to differentiate between what actually occurred in reality and what belongs to the patient’s imagination’.¹³⁰

At this point psychoanalysis abjures causality: the patient is neurotic because of the imagined abuse and has created the fantasy of the abuse due to their illness. The unconscious does not recognise before and after, and anything that breaks integrity can be the cause and effect of trauma. The presence of epilepsy and its consequences constitute abuse for the innocent parts. The tremendous sudden and permanent life-changes imposed by the illness are by default traumatic enough to produce psychological reactions and residue. The onset of the epilepsy in the book is only the beginning of a long course through murky paths. Everything after that is a constant fight on the part of the family to comprehend what has befallen them; the procession of doctors, psychologists, therapists who try to come up with an explanation and a solution. Horrifying monsters that are constantly present.

The motif of the monster pervades *Epileptic*, even though it is never a question of metaphysical or the supernatural. The monsters in *Epileptic* are real. Young Pierre-François learns not to be afraid of unnatural creatures:

I’m not afraid. I’m no longer afraid, ever since a dream I had. I was sleeping at my grandparents’. I was dreaming of Anubis, god of the dead. He was walking toward me. I was terrified. I woke up. Anubis was still there, and he was closing in on me. Suddenly everything froze. There was only the silhouette of the closet, which looked vaguely like a coyote. Since then, I may fear people, life, the future. But I no longer fear ghosts, witches, vampires, devils.¹³¹ (Plate 3.5)

The little boy has learned that imaginary fears are not a threat, and is growing to find out that real threats come from real situations; the major threat comes from his brother’s own body. In *Scaring the Monster Away*, Liat Sayfan and Kristin Hansen Lagattuta write:

¹³⁰ Ibid. p. 23.

¹³¹ B., *Epileptic*. p. 16.

Young children make distinctions between real versus imaginary realms and view imaginary creature situations as more equivocal and open to personal interpretation than real creatures. More broadly, these findings reveal that children take into account multiple aspects of the person and situation when reasoning about people's emotion script knowledge.¹³²

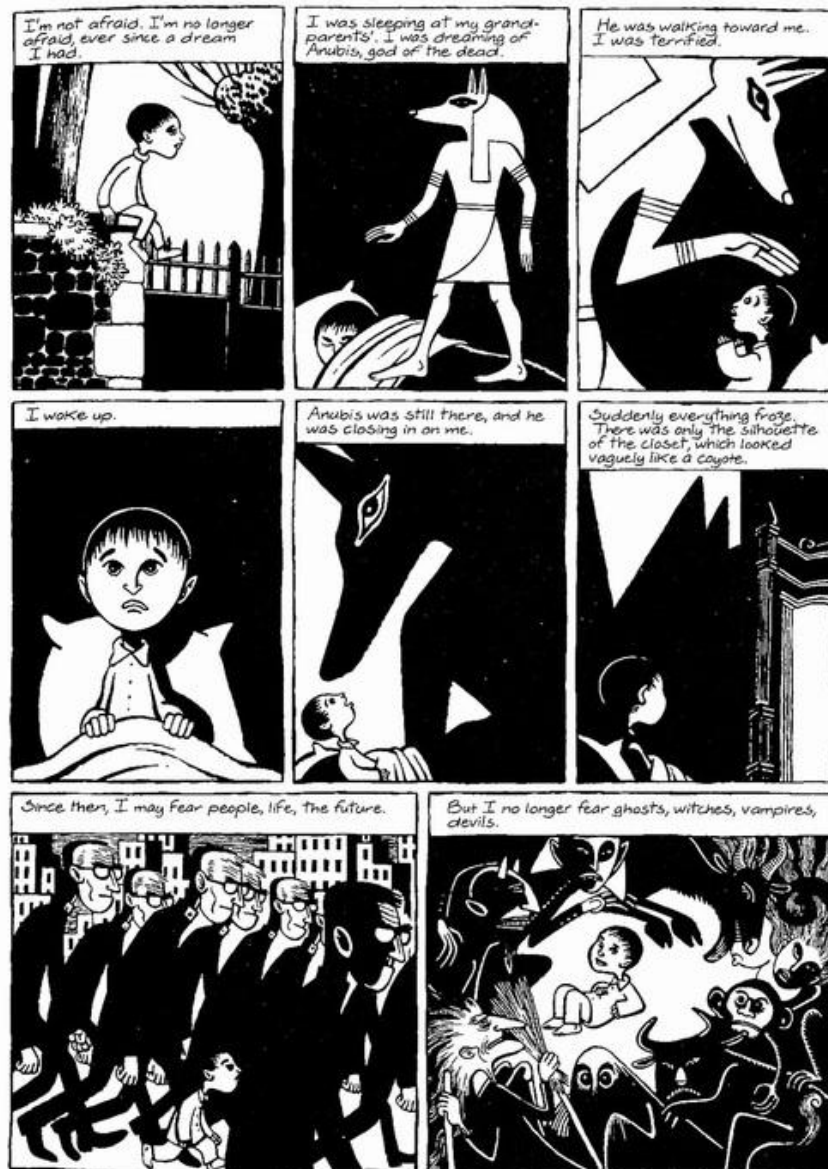


PLATE 3.5: *Epileptic*, p. 16

¹³² Liat Sayfan and Kristin Hansen Lagattuta, "Scaring the Monster Away: What Children Know About Managing Fears of Real and Imaginary Creatures," *Child Development* 80, no. 6 (2009). p. 1769.

In Pierre-François's case, epilepsy is consistently presented 'as a reptilian, mythic intrusion into normal family space and time',¹³³ it is a monster, a bloodthirsty dragon that will take the brother he knew away forever, will transform him into the material of nightmares. As a result Pierre-François decides to live with his ghosts and demons as friends, those imaginary creatures that are not monsters, but are a steady standpoint for him to face life from. His imaginary friends are monstrous in appearance, but have not intruded violently into his life, on the contrary, he has invited them in as a counterbalance to the reality of his brother's illness because their appearance of graphic terror is still less scary than Jean-Christophe's illness.

In his internal fantasies, Pierre-François reverses the effect, turning the hostile into something familiar, constructing a creative defence against his internalised aggression. Later he decides to channel this potentially destructive energy into his art making his choice of vocation look like an inevitable necessity, rather than a choice. We see this later, when he departs from home for studies in Paris. The pages prior to his departure to study at the Duperre School of Applied Arts are violent. He gives up on his fantasies and imaginary friends, he works on his art alone and devoting all of his spare time to this: 'Nowdays, when I reread some of those stories I wrote at the time I can't make heads or tails of them. What can I have been trying to say? I don't know anymore. But I had to draw and write constantly. I had to fill my time in order to prevent my brother's disease from reaching me'.¹³⁴

The novel is full of creatures of all possible origins and in all possible shapes and forms. Death, the devil, ghosts, dragons and every kind of mythological and imaginary creatures star in this story, but they are nowhere presented as a source of horror. They are mostly the benevolent friends in whom Pierre-François finds comfort, the last resort when everything real has let him down and appears a lot scarier than those imaginary devils of the closet. The monster in the house is not what most would expect it to be; it is the powerlessness and helplessness caused by the existence of the intruding and crippling thing that Jean-Christophe's epilepsy is; a horrendous ordeal, a tormenting voyage across turbulent seas that is to take them nowhere at all.

¹³³ Susan M. Squier, "Literature and Medicine, Future Tense: Making It Graphic," *Literature and Medicine* 27, no. 2 (Fall 2008). p. 136.

¹³⁴ B., *Epileptic*. p. 276.

In *Epileptic*, the trauma occurs because of the epilepsy of Jean-Christophe, while at the same time epilepsy becomes a vessel to contain all traumata of the family. This is not surprising, as according to the relevant research:

Four out of five consultations were initiated by someone other than the person experiencing the seizure. Nor was this merely a function of age at onset. One implication of this, of course, is that the distress associated with experiencing a first seizure is typically a less important determinant of consulting behaviour than the distress associated with witnessing one.¹³⁵

The parental couple, the suffering Jean-Christophe and the two younger siblings, all develop a rather unhealthy attitude towards life and perceiving the illness: epilepsy gives them the opportunity to ignore all their other problems, or incorporate them into this one trauma, transforming the family, continuously seeking the wrong solution to the wrong problem. Jean-Christophe's condition is non-reversible. His illness is socially, physically and psychologically crippling. The helplessness experienced by all is the first of a series of traumata that the family will experience. The first reaction is to seek medical help. Jean-Christophe is admitted to Saint-Anne hospital, under the care of Professor T:

They examine Jean-Christophe. They perform gaseous encephalograms on him. They shoot gas into his brain to inflate it so they can take photos, in which they hope to find traces of a lesion or a tumor. When my parents tell me about it, I visualise my brother in the clutches of scientists. The doctors believe they've found a circumvolution in the brain that's causing my brother's seizures.

¹³⁵ Scambler, *Epilepsy*. p. 5.

Pierre-François asks the doctors if the procedure was hurtful for his brother. He receives the answer: ‘They injected gas into his brain. Of course it hurts’.¹³⁶



PLATE 3.6: *Epileptic*, p. 40

The panel in which Jean-Christophe is subjected to the doctors' tests is horrifying (Plate 3.6). Depicted from the nose up, Jean-Christophe's head is shaved with several of pipes attached on it, the background is filled with tangled cables and mechanical medical equipment. The doctor is shown in a

¹³⁶ B., *Epileptic*. p. 40.

double, tiny among the machinery, with a vicious expression on his face taking satisfaction in his act of torturing. This completely imaginary scene is a major source of trauma for Pierre-François. In his childish perception his brother has been subjected to a Frankensteinian experiment; when the mother hears about Professor T.'s intention to operate upon Jean-Christophe and the possible consequences of that she faints.

All of the family is devastated. It is probably their most sensitive moment, and a turning point in their lives at the influence of a major stress. That is when Jean-Christophe comes across a magazine article on zen macrobiotics and requests to give this a try before going on with the operation. The whole of the family hangs on this potential solution. Thus, the initial trauma of the onset of the epilepsy is aggravated by the unsympathetic treatment received in the public hospital. The continuous failure to find a working treatment is a vivification of this first impression of helplessness. The results of the trauma manifest in the rest of the book, and particularly in the events after Pierre-François has moved to Paris for his education. Everything in Paris is a reminiscence of his childhood, any attempt to cut free of his past fails; every return to his parental home is a return to this sensitive age and the unending problem.

The narration in *Epileptic* is prescribed by the nature of the pathography and the visual medium. The particularities of the story are all due to the presence of epilepsy and the way they are expressed is the use of the graphic medium. It is the memories of David B, the author, spoken by the voice –shown by the gaze– of Pierre-François, the narrator, and they carry the identity of their agency. They are not nameless facts, data on a family's suffering, they are worked memories of a man personally involved in the matter, they have been forged through an unconscious processing and are exposed through the creative process of drafting the graphic novel. In his early paper on the *Unconscious* (1915), Freud notes:

The psychoanalytical postulation of unconscious psychic activity seems, on the one hand, to be a further continuation of the primitive animism that once surrounded us with reflections of our own consciousness, and on the other, to be an extension of Kant's revision of

the way we conceive of external perception. Just as Kant warned us against overlooking how our perception is subjectively determined and cannot be regarded as identical to the unknowable thing that is perceived, so psychoanalysis warns us not to mistake our perceptions of consciousness for the unconscious psychic processes that are their object.¹³⁷

The bridge between consciousness and the Unconscious is language, the medium that attempts to explain the mental processes and deliver them into the culturally restrained frame of conscious perception – always tricked by a variety of censorships which reform the ideas many times before they emerge in consciousness. Freud claimed to have found the royal way to the Unconscious in dreaming, or the interpretation of dreaming to be precise. As per Freud and his 1900 *Interpretation of Dreams*, the Unconscious is being outlined through dreaming in what essentially is a visual language. Feelings, thoughts, traumata and hidden secrets are being visualised during the dream and this is the first step towards reaching the Unconscious –through what Freud calls “the royal way”. Later this visual language is put into oral or written speech, is in fact translated into another linguistic system. Every time the Unconscious is put through a new translation (from “unsaid” to dream, from dream to speech) it is processed anew in a complex meditation as the censorship keeps bringing obstacles from dreaming to the memory of the dream, to the description of this memory.

We can see now how comics seem to emulate a very early stage in the interpretation process, viz. the dreaming. In comics the visual and written are inseparable, words are part of the visual value of the page more than they are speech, as it is indeed the case with dreams where written words and spoken dialogues comprise inseparable elements of the dream which make them ultimately more a part of the visual than allowing them independent auditory value. As a result in the case of visual language the boundaries between the two are harder to draw; visual language provides more immediate access to the unconscious, a shortcut in a way, nonetheless a medium that needs

¹³⁷ Sigmund Freud, *The Unconscious* (London: Penguin Books 2005). p. 54.

interpretation in itself. By its own nature the visual medium is more complex and demanding in terms of analysis, since it combines written and pictorial language in a unique frame of narrative. In the introduction to *The Language of Comics*, Robin Varnum and Christina T. Gibbons note that ‘while words must be spoken or written one after the other in time and are apprehended sequentially, the elements of an image are arranged side by side in space and are apprehended all at once’.¹³⁸ Apprehension, thus, is less formulaic, closer to free association and as a result closer to the Unconscious. Of course the final result on the comics page has not emerged impulsively, but after painstaking research and application of artistic methods which do deprive it of the immediacy and spontaneity of an analytic lapsus. However the creation of the page is very much the result of a superimposing critic, a conscious superego going through vague or even unconscious fits of inspiration during the first stages of the creation, manipulating the material as the dreaming secondary revision does, presenting it in a compact form and handing it to someone else to interpret. On the other hand, the reading experience is possibly even closer to dreaming, it is plausible that the reader perceives the comics work unconsciously understanding its similarities with dreaming, finding the medium familiar, even if they cannot immediately understand why. The function of the visual bears a series of similarities to the dreaming process, as has been described by Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and the mechanism the reader employs to decipher this medium seems to be very similar to the mechanisms they have been using to narrate a dream, with all the interpretive dynamics this carries through.

Returning to *Epileptic*, in the middle of the novel, Pierre-François decides to change his name to David B., visually presented in a meaningful panorama outlining the forceful impression that his burdened childhood has left upon the narrator as a manifestation of his victory over the illness that has been dominant in the family since his childhood. The art is feverish, the anxiety palpable, all members of the family but the afflicted Jean-Christophe are present. Present as well are the methods –orientalism, spiritualism, swedenborgianism– that had presented themselves as potential cures, just to bring more misery into the family. All these peculiarities are presented as a

¹³⁸ Christina T. Gibbons (Ed.) Robin Varnum, *The Language of Comics: Word and Image* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2007). p. xi.

huge insidious Japanese dragon and an army of malevolent skeletons while the narrator is drawn in a suit of armour, declaring his victory over the illness that consumed his own brother but did not prevail over him. Or did it? After having spent his entire childhood and adolescence as the brother of an epileptic, Pierre-François does not have as many options as he would like to think, to escape from this situation. His identity has been shaped by his upbringing and he has to carry it with him in every step of the way.

Loneliness is not infrequently the result of an overcrowded familial environment. Member of a family of five in which all the attention is focused on the epileptic brother, Pierre-François is in a state of melancholic loneliness, unable to communicate his own feelings under the weight of his brother's condition. The more the family gets immersed in Jean-Christophe's epilepsy, the more Pierre-François is immured in his self-made fortress of loneliness. A family that works to accommodate Jean-Christophe and his condition impedes its members from developing an individual identity. In this environment the imaginative Pierre-François is suffocating, a feeling that he transforms and experiences as a deep, organic loneliness of the kind that proves to be dangerously addictive. In their paper, Nilsson, Lindström and Nåden summarise the concept of loneliness, distinguishing three types of it according to Yalom (interpersonal isolation, intrapersonal isolation and existential isolation) and four according to Gotesky (physical solitude, estrangement, experiencing the self as an outsider and "solitude", which is essentially the person's own desire for loneliness).¹³⁹ Pierre-François's loneliness is of a mixed type. He is being unintentionally isolated from his family as all the attention is turned to the sick brother, but he also chooses to withdraw himself from this environment as much as physically possible, so as to preserve his sense of self before he gets absorbed by the familial reality.

Pierre-François turns his loneliness to an internal battleground, fighting his own fight against the environment in which he grows up. His way out is the forest adjoining the family property where he takes shelter when tired of fighting with his brother and his brother's illness:

The night belongs to me. I turn off the light and pretend to go to sleep. In fact, I go out to the balcony and grab the

¹³⁹ et al. Brita Nilsson, "Is Loneliness a Psychological Dysfunction? A Literary Study of the Phenomenon of Loneliness," *The Authors. Journal Compilation* (2006). p. 95.

drainpipe. I climb down the wall to the park. I leave my weapons and my armor to Genghis Khan. I don't need it where I'm going. I journey deep into the forest. I get lost in the woods. It's a magical moment. I'm drunk. My ghosts join me and provide me with an escort. I'm on the lookout for shadows. I listen to the countless tiny sounds the animals make. I vault over the fence and slip into the neighbours garden. I explore it, with great stealth, and then return home.¹⁴⁰ (Plate 3.7).



PLATE 3.7: *Epileptic*, pp. 83-84

The lonely nightly descent into the forest is the magical escape from the unbearable tension in his household. Pierre-François creates a world of his own, that he doesn't share with anyone. In his adventures he is accompanied by his 'ghost' imaginary figures that provide him with warmth and support. The ghosts composed from the bizarre associations of the family are a mixture of fantasy, mysticism and terror. They include his deceased grandfather and even Death himself. Their graphic representation is dark, worrisome; they become

¹⁴⁰ B., *Epileptic*. pp. 83-84.

embodied into the woods, they get attached to Pierre-François's walking body, they accompany him in broad daylight, they grow with him and alternately become him.

Do the ghosts represent Pierre-François's pathology? Certainly they are juxtaposed with Jean-Christophe's ghost of epilepsy. However the ghost of epilepsy, represented as a serpent that penetrates Jean-Christophe's body, seizes him and shakes him, and possesses him and rules his destiny and identity; Pierre-François's ghosts can be kept away when not needed. When Pierre-François as a young adult relocates to Paris, he does not take the ghosts with him:

-I'm headed for Paris as well. I've been accepted at the Applied Arts School.

-So can we come with you?

-I'm not bringing you along. You're staying here.

-Why?

-I need to be alone.¹⁴¹ (Plate 3.8).

There is a major difference between "alone" and "lonely". But is this an attempt of Pierre-François to shake the loneliness, trying to leave it behind, or is he dwelling deeper in himself, deprived even of his imaginary friends? His course in Paris will not relieve him of his own pathology. He takes up living in a small apartment, drawing non-stop, getting his demons and ghosts on paper, utterly alone, without friends, not even acquaintances, with his art as an only shelter:

But the bulwark is not always effective against solitude. So I plunge into the streets and I walk. Walking is another way of writing and drawing. I bring along a map on which I record every street I've traversed. My goal is to pass at least once through every street in Paris. But... Actually I'm furious! So there! During all those years I said nothing, I deferred to my brother. I wanted to be the one

¹⁴¹ Ibid. p. 275.

who doesn't cause any problems. I forfeited part of myself, and in vain. It's over. Jean-Christophe will never get better. And the past ties my insides in knots, screaming.¹⁴²



PLATE 3.8: *Epileptic*, p. 275

The graphic imagery during this outburst is equally high-powered. Pierre-François appears in the first panel on the left of the left page being reserved, sitting on a desk, holding his face between his hands. Then he walks

¹⁴² Ibid. pp. 279-280.

out of a tiny door, into the Parisian streets and the more furious he becomes the larger his figure is drawn, his face covered in black shadows, growing larger and larger until it takes up the whole of the panel in a horrifying close-up. In the next panel all of his body consists of small versions of his face, one next to another, upside down, grimacing, screaming in a bold graphic manner. It is an internal battle, fought and lost continuously, always taking him in a dead end and never rewarding him with any medal of honour.

Epileptic is the story of a series of epic battles; one taking place in the head and body of the epileptic Jean-Christophe; one taking place inside the mind and psyche of the younger brother Pierre-François; one taking place within the family. There are detailed graphic representations of historical, mythical and fantastical battles. The element of the battle keeps up with the narrative of the history of Jean-Christophe's epilepsy, the history of the ill body, the sick individual who is carried away by powers above himself, and still within his own flesh. During the novel we are presented with fifteen drawn incidents of armies in combat; biblical battles, the Mexican wars, the Tartars, the war in Algeria, Genghis Khan, German Nazis, the samurais, robots, demons, ghosts; legions fighting one another without purpose and without an end.

Pierre-François explains how this has always been fascinating for him, how his father's narrations of the biblical times and his mother's account of Cortés's conquest of Mexico always stirred his fantasy, how war was one of his favourite pastimes during his early childhood:

It's all Jean-Christophe and I are interested in. We spent our days drawing battle scenes. My favourite historical figure is Genghis Khan. I discovered him while reading books on Marco Polo. His story is just like in 'Michael Strogoff', but worse. It's my own corner of the past. Here I'm free to indulge my warrior fantasies. Endless horseback rides, battles without quarter, piles of skulls – these evoke in me a terrible delight. I'm not any one person. I'm a group, an army. I have enough rage in me for one hundred thousand warriors. I relate my brother's

seizures to this rage. What horse is carrying him away?¹⁴³

(Plate 3.9)

These sketched battles are infused with all his despair, fury and aggressiveness, all the feelings towards his brother's condition are channelled through them. Furthermore, the drawing of epic battles is a way for him to come to terms with epilepsy. It is his way of understanding the condition, as a huge battle inside his brother's body; he visualises in detail and structure the vague, indefinable reality that is a seizure. The fits of Jean-Christophe make sense, as a battlefield, as the violence between two armies, as the organised use of weapons, trauma and death.

The battles become more and more magnificent; it is not only historical armies that fight, it is metaphysical creatures. As Jean-Christophe's state gets worse, it is obvious that he will never be able to win his battle, so the more detached from reality are the drawings, the more mysterious and dark figures interfere on the battlefield. All the fear and anger, the powerlessness and awkwardness of the situation are expressed on paper, in the images of daemons and fairies and ghosts and skeletons, images of horror that the young author has internalised, through his experience not only with the sick brother, but also with his parents' dubious methods of treating Jean-Christophe's epilepsy.

The family has chosen to fight this battle in a peculiar manner. After all conventional weapons have been proved useless (or have not been tried at all in the fear of making things worse, as in the case of brain-surgery) they try a series of dubious approaches, such as macrobiotics and occultism. All are to be proven false hopes, and Jean-Christophe's situation deteriorates rapidly, despite the desperate efforts of the family. However the fight never stops, any futile solution will be followed by a new potential miracle cure, only to let everyone down a short while later. Every time this happens Jean-Christophe's parents roll up their sleeves and discover new odd prospects in yet one more pronounced remedy.

¹⁴³ Ibid. pp. 18-19.



PLATE 3.9: *Epileptic*, p. 18

The story begins in the mid-1960's, a time of change for urban France. The Algerian War has finished just a couple of years ago, and its impact is still fresh on the consciousness of the French people. May 1968 is a few years ahead, and the entire social order is being recreated, reinvented and delivered into the New Age. Everything in the 1960's is new and shiny, the usher of the new times:

To create the “total ambiance” of the modernized home, the totality of use-values in the home had to be newly adapted to capitalist mass production through the development of “design”: a functionalist aesthetic that

would render the components uniform, or compatible, the stove-sink-refrigerator flowing together in a seamless, white-and-chrome unit, the design of the objects and their context mutually reinforcing each other in a seamless ambiance.¹⁴⁴

Into this new “white-and-chrome” environment, where tradition is fading and familial ties are constantly untwisted, where religion is not a powerful fortress, and even traditional medicine is subverted by the movement of anti-psychiatry, Jean-Christophe’s illness comes as an additional, unstoppable plague, impossible for the family to deal with, the break of a social promise for “better days” to come.

The family is a dynamic schema, constantly reinventing itself in the light of each member’s activity. Like the water of a lake that gets turbulent if someone throws a little stone, so the body of the family is vulnerable to unexpected, sudden and violent interferences. Births, deaths, illnesses, shatter the protective frame each household builds around itself and throws the family into the quest for a new equilibrium: the endless chase of balance and harmony, a new fragile construction to support them (at least for a while). In return the tensions developed in the family shape individual personalities and psychopathologies as well. *Epileptic* features an example of dramatic family dynamics, where every issue affecting one of its members impacts on every other member and sends the family pitching on waves of uncertainty. Jean-Christophe’s illness, the dominant element, has covered up all other less important familial traumata but at the same time it bears within it all minor malaises, which re-emerge continuously, get attached to this larger problem that is Jean-Christophe’s epilepsy and create an avalanche which brings down every single member of the family, from the tragic parents to the younger sister, Florence.

Even though *Epileptic* is an autobiography of its author, it is at the same time the biography not only of his sick brother, but of the whole family as well –going back to the extended family by reciting the life-stories of the grandparents and great-grandparents. It is clear that the past of the family is

¹⁴⁴ Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture*, October Books (Cambridge, Mass., etc.,: MIT P., 1996). p. 192.

important for the narrator to explain (or simply bring into frame) the current condition of his family. And it is not merely the actual, historical, past; during the adventures in search of Jean-Christophe's cure, the family comes across a medium who will bring them in touch with their previous lives, the unresolved issues of which have been, according to the medium, a constant burden up until their current reincarnation. The mother's story illustrates this:

Faeti-Tag is a spirit the psychic told me about. He haunts my mother. They lived together in an earlier life. He was a clockmaker in Austria. They were happy. He would like to live with her again, by any means possible.

—Already back when my mother was expecting a second child, he wanted to be reincarnated in that child so that we could live together again.

—I thought you were an only child.

—Your grandmother had an abortion. She was too poor to raise a second child. As a result Faeti-Tag was unable to reincarnate himself.

—Oh...

Who is this spirit who opens up the closet of family secrets and spills its contents for everyone to see?

—Now your father and I have to make another child, into which he'll reincarnate himself and we'll be together again.

—Yay! A KID BROTHER! A kid brother!

A kid brother who won't be sick. A kid brother who will heal the wounds opened by the eldest one. A kid brother who will bring us happiness.

—That's out of the question.

Soon we give up the séances. It's all bullshit anyway.¹⁴⁵

(Plate 3.10)



PLATE 3.10: *Epileptic*, pp. 151-152

This nine-panel sequence is illustrated with skeletons moving from being the dominant element into the background, lurking there, waiting to emerge again, to mingle with the living and draw life from their vividness. Monsters are dominating the view, but they are not scary. The graphic monsters in *Epileptic* cannot scare anyone, they exist as a vivid mix of the obvious and the elusive, the visual that can be perceived by the reader and the hidden drama which can be described but never fully understood. Later in the story, during a constantly imminent breakdown, Jean-Christophe announces that he is going to die so that he can later be reincarnated as a new (healthy) child in his mother's womb; so that he can re-live the life he lost from the start.

This reproduction of the medium's "prophesy" is clearly due to an attachment problem which has disrupted familial dynamics from the beginning of the story. Jean-Christophe is –has always been– a child who does not want

¹⁴⁵ B., *Epileptic*. pp. 151-152.

to grow up, does not want to assume the responsibilities of adulthood. As a result he embraces his illness, he lets his illness consume him, he gives up completely; epilepsy becomes the principal part of his identity, because through this he can fulfil his semi-conscious wish to remain in the maternal womb and never be taken away from it:



PLATE 3.11: *Epileptic*, p. 302

–Ma... I wanna stay home with you!

–You can't do that, Jean-Christophe. Look, your father and me, we work!

–Ma...

–You can’t stay here all by yourself. What’ll you do?
–Well... I’ll work...
–Doing what? You’ve got classes in Paris, which you never attend. Here you’ll end up doing nothing too! Jean-Christophe!¹⁴⁶ (Plate 3.11).

At the end of this dialogue Jean-Christophe fits violently. Epilepsy is his refuge from growing up. He is determinedly epileptic, and always will be. This is his permanent identity, and he will never try to change it. The illness has consumed him, has deprived him from all he could be, but mostly because of his eagerness for this to happen.

The epilogue of the book features David B.’s dream from the night of September 26th 1999. He entitles it *Kisses*. It starts with him as a child, tucked in bed when his mother comes to kiss him goodnight. She bends towards him in a clumsy way and only manages to hurt him when her forehead knocks his front teeth. Then his brother comes to wish goodnight –it is a current version of his brother’s appearance, bloated and scarred, the permanently epileptic with no reminiscence of the child he used to be. He gets on a chair and plans to jump on small Pierre-François in an attempt to hug him. His body disappears from the bed. Jean-Christophe is frustrated when the father walks in trying to figure out what is going on. The scenery changes and they are all in the garden:

–You’ve got to let your brother hug you.
–I don’t mind if he does, just not like that.
Jean-Christophe reproaches me violently. I am at one end of the garden as if at the end of a shooting gallery. From the other end my sister blows me a kiss that reaches me. My father is at the second storey window. He’d like to hug me but he seems to hesitate. I’m standing in the void, face to face with him. But I’m invisible.¹⁴⁷

All the hurt, fear and trauma of his yearly interaction with the family is present in this dream. Everyone but his little sister is trying to hurt him, even though he

¹⁴⁶ Ibid. p. 302.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid. pp. 353-354.

can acknowledge that this is not their actual intention. The communication is broken, and even at his time of hurt and fear all the attention is turned to his older brother. He is literally invisible, even when the actual intention of his parents is to offer affection to him. On the next page he and his brother ride a pair of horses out of the window and into the night. The last few pages are a confession to his brother: 'When you'd have a seizure I'd get the sense that you were floating off somewhere, that your spirit was leaving. Joining the dead... in hell... in some other dimension. I had this fantasy that if I climbed onto a horse I could find you, tear you away from this daily, recurring death, and carry you back to life'.¹⁴⁸ His brother changes faces, the dialogue goes on and on, he is trying to deal with it. He is trying to make sense of his life. He is trying to redeem himself, maybe for being healthy and unable to help. In the end of the dream (and the book) his face becomes his brother's face. They have visually merged and he can now sign "The End".

¹⁴⁸ Ibid. pp. 355-356.

CHAPTER FOUR

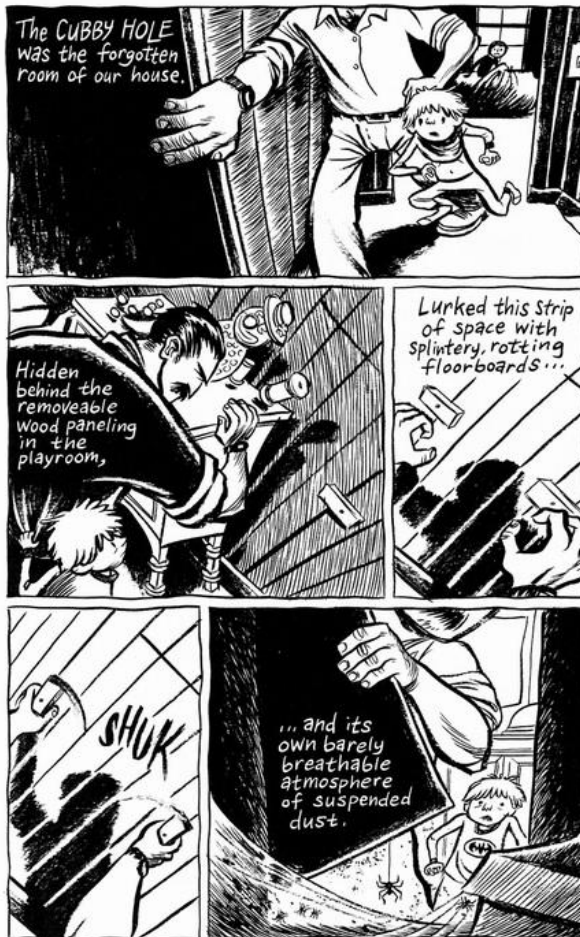
Blankets: Religiously and Socially Constructed Constraints

A blanket is something comforting, something to inspire confidence and trust; it is used by toddlers to relax when upset and as a sleeping aid. Blankets can be associated with a “safe place”, somewhere to hide from the world and be protected from harm. *Blankets* is the title Craig Thompson has given to his graphic autobiography, a book that has nothing to do with the ideal of a safe place. It is the story of growing up in Wisconsin in the 1970s-1980s, in an Evangelical Christian family, and of all the constraints, imposed guilt and repression this has inflicted upon a young boy’s mentality and character development. This is a different book to the previous two we have been considering so far. It is primarily focused on the author-narrator himself, making it more personal, and allowing more room for the presentation of his own internal conflict rather than the traumata and struggles of other people in the family. It presents more clearly the effects of growing up, since the plot is not disoriented by massive, objective dramas as undoubtedly is the Holocaust in *Maus*, or a debilitating illness as the epilepsy in David B’s book. We come across a different type of trauma here: and its presentation takes place in a more personal style and narrating tempo. Since the story is so much internal, and its effects are internal as well, the entire of the presentation is appearing as particularly personal, without being distracted by the dramas of others.

The book starts by exposing episodes from Craig’s, and his younger brother Phil’s childhood, who used to share the same bed when they were little. Thus, it starts in the most intimate room, where people go to sleep and let their guards down, the room where dreams and nightmares happen. The opening sequence narrates a nightly quarrel about the blankets that brings the strict father roaring upstairs in their bedroom to punish the boys by sending little Phil to sleep in the “cubby hole”:

The cubby hole was the forgotten room of our house.
Hidden behind the removable wood panelling in the
playroom, lurked this strip of space with splintery, rotting

floorboards... and its own barely breathable atmosphere of suspended dust. Uninsulated, unlit, and uninhabited – except by spiders and vermin (we heard skittering within the walls at night) and a few dust filled cardboard boxes, the cubby hole was best LEFT forgotten.¹⁴⁹ (Plate 4.1).



15



16

PLATE 4.1: *Blankets*, pp. 15-16

Phil is taken in a dark place for the night as a punishment for unacceptable behaviour, but Craig is punished in a more suitable way: ‘Now you have the bed all to yourself; are you happy?’,¹⁵⁰ asks the father with the gravest look on his face. Guilt and remorse is the immediate effect on Craig, an effect that will carry through his adolescence and early adulthood.

¹⁴⁹ Craig Thompson, *Blankets* : *An Illustrated Novel* (Marietta, Ga.: Top Shelf, 2007). pp. 15-16.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.* p. 64.

In his second theory of the psychical apparatus Freud, moving on from his original topographic theory (dividing the psychical apparatus into Conscious, Pre-conscious and Unconscious) proposes a structural model of the psyche based on the idea of three diverse and distinct agencies, namely id, ego and super-ego.¹⁵¹ If id refers to the basic instinctual psychic needs and urges of the person, the ego is the realistic, down to earth expression of psychic function. The super-ego however is the moral critic, the scrutiniser, a constant and ever present judge in charge of fulfilling the social commands and making sure that the person is following the norms, thus not running the risk to find itself ostracized from the community. The most obvious, and most frequent, the voice of the super-ego is the voice of the parents, these early judges who are responsible for imposing our initial sense of the social order.

However, Freud's theories about the structure of the psychical apparatus were (like most of his theories) challenged and altered through different approaches, much to his and his followers' aversion. Melanie Klein, born and analysed in Vienna by Ferenczi, migrated to London in her forties, after meeting Alix Strachey at the Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute, in 1926. She was one of the first child analysts, and her work stirred animosity among the psychoanalytic circles,¹⁵² culminating to a long and fierce enmity with Anna Freud, which outlasted her father, and resulted into the formation of two opposing psychoanalytic groups, which later grew more apart. Her different theories on the formulation of the superego and the formulation of the Oedipal Complex was the basis of her argument against Freud (and the Freudians' argument against her): 'According to Klein, the internal world of the small child is a mass of destructive and anxious fantasies, redolent with unconscious images of mayhem and death. For Freud, the child is a selfish savage; for Klein, it is a murderous cannibal'.¹⁵³ However, Klein was presenting her "internal objects" emphasis as a development –and not opposition– to Freud's theory of the superego, and indeed, her description is not dissimilar to Freud's:

¹⁵¹ J. Laplanche, J. B. Pontalis, and Institute of Psycho-analysis (Great Britain), *The Language of Psycho-Analysis* (London: Karnac and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1988). pp. 449-453 and 130-143

¹⁵² Zaretsky, *Secrets of the Soul : A Social and Cultural History of Psychoanalysis*. p. 254.

¹⁵³ Gay, *Freud : A Life for Our Times*. p.468.

[T]he person's conscience is a precipitate or representative of his early relations to his parents. He has in some sense internalized his parents –has taken them into himself. There they become a differentiated part of his ego –his super-ego– and an agency which advances against the rest of his ego certain requirements, reproaches, and admonitions, and which stands in opposition to his instinctual impulses.¹⁵⁴

As a result, the parental attitude towards naughtiness can be a decisive factor in how the child will grow to perceive guilt. The “bad boy/bad girl” image can be carried through the entire life, and it will colour each and every decision, attitude and the person's perception of the world and society.

Often the (Freudian) super-ego turns out to be even stricter and more restraining than the actual parents have ever been, and this is because the memory of scolding or punishment has been magnified as a result of the guilt it inflicted. The function of the super-ego can at times be horribly restraining for the development of the person, and overcoming it, or rather harnessing it entails hard work and conscious effort. The aftertaste of an encounter with the super-ego is mostly guilt. The deeply rooted feeling that what we do (or think or feel), is in some way filthy, impure and wrong.

But Klein's stance on the superego was not identical to Freud's. According to Zaretsky: ‘Freud conceptualized the superego as a psychic agency to be understood in terms of its place within a structure, not as a personification. Klein, by contrast, viewed psychic structure –id, ego and superego– as composed wholly of object representations’.¹⁵⁵ Still, Klein's approach was innovative and groundbreaking, and her work on child analysis comprises a breakthrough extended further in the years that followed. Her view on the development of the psychic apparatus is rather graphic, portraying a different functionality of super-ego between adults and children:

¹⁵⁴ Melanie Klein, *Love, Guilt, and Reparation, and Other Works, 1921-1945*, Free Press ed., *The Writings of Melanie Klein* (New York: Free Press, 1984). p. 248.

¹⁵⁵ Zaretsky, *Secrets of the Soul : A Social and Cultural History of Psychoanalysis*. pp. 256-257.

In the adult, it is true, we find a super-ego at work which is a great deal more severe than the subject's parents were in reality, and which is in other ways by no means identical with them. Nevertheless it approximates them more or less. But in the small child we come across a super-ego of the most incredible and phantastic character. [...]. We get to look upon the child's fear of being devoured, or cut up, or torn to pieces, or its terror of being surrounded and pursued by menacing figures, as a regular component of its mental life; and we know that the man-eating wolf, the fire-spewing dragon, and all the evil monsters out of myths and fairy-stories flourish and exert their unconscious influence in the phantasy of each individual child, and it feels itself persecuted and threatened by those evil shapes.¹⁵⁶

Fantasy is dominant here, and impressions of consumption, violence and the body being torn to pieces are visualised vividly. The visual imagery described by Klein, spurting directly from the Unconscious, is immediately recognised in Thomson's graphic approach to representing his childhood memories (and the same goes for David B's *Epileptic*, as we saw in the previous chapter). Klein concludes:

But I think we can know more than this. I have no doubt from my own analytic observations that the real objects behind those imaginary, terrifying figures are the child's own parents, and that those dreadful shapes in some way or other reflect the features of its father and mothers, however distorted and phantastic the resemblance may be.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ Klein, *Love, Guilt, and Reparation, and Other Works, 1921-1945*. p. 249.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.* p. 249.

An autobiography is a return to these initial steps that made someone the person they are today. It takes a lot of strength and insight to return mentally to the terrifying helplessness of childhood and it is in a sense more than a return, it is a recurrence. Narrating the past is not a simple statement, it is an act of reliving it, re-evaluating it and going through it anew. Born in 1975, Thompson publishes his graphic autobiography in 2003, so he writes the book when he is not yet thirty. The book is mostly a narration of his childhood and teenage years and in this narration, in his presentation of himself as the child he used to be, we can see the wild, roaring imaginary and terrifying building-up of his super-ego step by step; fuelled by the guilt embedded in his upbringing.

Craig Thomson uses the graphic medium to narrate his story of subtly inflicted psychological terrorism. When the father forces Phil to sleep in the cubby hole, one single image summarises the terror and awe the place inspires in the children. The panel is framed awry, the point of view located at the bottom right, showing the father's enormous hands opening the folding bed which is momentarily represented as the ferocious mouth of a wild beast, a crocodile, or something of similar fieriness, with huge sharp teeth, pointy tongue and an empty reptilian eye. Terrible figures of skinny, tortuous monsters fill in the rest of the cubby hole, while behind the father, at the frame of the open door we can see Phil with his eyes open wide in terror (drawn as a full circle), horror-struck in the prospect of spending the night in there. The panel is not only a graphic representation of something horrible, it is staging the worst fears of the child; they are all there, in the bold lines that sketch out the father's harsh hands, the curvy lines of the imaginary creatures' hunched backs, and particularly the centre-framed bewildered face of little Phil. The text is placed above and below the image, cut out from it, something which is not a standard method of comics presentation. In this particular case though, the picture is so forceful, giving the sense that it has 'pushed' the text to its edges, becoming the most important aspect, narrating the story on a detailed and elaborate level. The pages that follow comprise a string of flash-backs explaining how Craig has always been 'a pathetic old brother',¹⁵⁸ in his own words; words that reveal an inherent repressed guilt which is demonstrated as reasonable if we examine the actual events (he caused a fight which forced his

¹⁵⁸ Thompson, *Blankets : An Illustrated Novel*. p. 18.

little brother to sleep in a scary place), but which goes deeper into a guilt-production mechanism deriving from the social and religious environment where Craig has been brought up.

The building up of this guilt which comprises a major part of the hero's identity is dominant throughout the novel. Early in the book we are presented with a scene from Craig's classroom. The teacher is handing out the creative writing papers and turning to Craig, remarks in front of the whole class: 'You get an 'F'. An 'F' for 'FILTH' not for 'FUNNY'. Do you think this is FUNNY, Craig? An eight page poem about people eating... excrement. [...]. This is FILTH! I know your mother and she's a good CHRISTIAN lady and she would be DISGUSTED with this. She would be disgusted with YOU'.¹⁵⁹ The mischievousness or childish naughtiness is presented as a major moral defect of the child, instilling the idea of sin and personal blame.



29

PLATE 4.2: *Blankets*, p. 29

¹⁵⁹ Ibid. pp. 27-29.

Craig receives the scolding passively. He cries in despair, but the source of the despair is difficult to define. He feels that he is being mistreated, but at the same time his deeply installed sense of guilt makes him feel responsible for all that has happened; this is revealed not only through illustration, but in the capitalised and highlighted text as well, which gives an extra layer of volume to the whole incident. Guilt wins the battle in the end, and Craig never reacts efficiently to the moral injustice inflicted upon him on this or other occasions. He has no other way to react than to punish his tormentors by imagining them eating their own excrement,¹⁶⁰ (Plate 4.2) a picture drawn in a violently succulent manner, disgusting as it is filled with rage and despair. This abominable image is followed by an explanation: a three page flash-back to describe the sexual abuse Craig and his brother have suffered at the hands of a male babysitter.



31

PLATE 4.3: *Blankets*, p. 31

¹⁶⁰ Ibid. p. 29.

The connection is straightforward; it is graphically presented as cause and effect. The first two panels of the babysitter story are embodied in the largest panel of people eating excrement. It is thus directly associated with that strand. The babysitter is informing the two children that he has something funny to tell them, but he can only tell them one at a time. He then takes Craig aside and they disappear behind a closed door. When they come back the babysitter laughs loudly, while Craig sniggers uneasily, his face sunken, his eyes cloudy. Phil is roaring with enthusiasm: 'MY TURN, MY TURN! [...]. It must be REALLY funny, huh?'.¹⁶¹ Craig doesn't react to anything in any way, (Plate 4.3). He doesn't protect his younger brother and this is a heavy burden for him to carry, which reinforces the already dominant sense of guilt. He is staring hopelessly as the babysitter is taking his brother to the other room where he knows exactly what is going to happen to him. The last scene of this sequence is contained in a black cloud which weights over Craig's head, and covers his arching body, as he is leaning over his desk, back in the classroom where everyone is still laughing over his failed poem. He has been unable to take action, rebel, assert his rights or find comfort in family and school. His one rebellion act –the excrement poem– has been met with more scolding, proving to him that he is not only helpless, but mistaken if he thinks he can seek help (or even payback). The community's ethics and religion (their ethics are indeed due to religious beliefs) are more important than little Craig and his problems. Purity in expression is more important than a child crying out for help.

Religion is a recurring theme in *Blankets*, it comprises one of the major factors contributing to the formation of the protagonist's super-ego, the tormenting unconscious guilt. In a discussion of the Catholic Church's doctrine concerning sin and guilt, William Shuter points out that:

Like conscience, with which it is frequently equated, the superego can be unforgiving, inflexible, even cruel and sadistic in its treatment of the self. In actual practice, therefore, psychoanalysis as a mode of therapy attends less to realistic or normal guilt than to unconscious guilt

¹⁶¹ Ibid. pp. 30-31.

and to such guilt-generated conditions as depression and obsessiveness, conditions that the Church has learned to recognize from centuries of experience in the confessional'.¹⁶²

Even though the story takes place in an Evangelical parish it is safe to say that in *Blankets* the church is playing a major structural role (akin to the role Shuter ascribes to the Catholic church) in the formation of the super-ego, the agency that psychoanalysis is combating using more or less fierce methods in its continuing endeavour to free the individual from pathological restraints. The doctrine of sin is a powerful mental image, not only because it invokes the idea of punishment, but because it is based on the general perception of one not being worth of being loved and appreciated.

Shuter continues: 'It is not fear but rather the love of God, whom sin offends, that serves as the motive of that perfect contrition that itself obtains forgiveness. The capacity of the superego to evoke love as well as fear indicates that it functions as something more than an agent of self-scrutiny and self-judgment'.¹⁶³ It is not a fear of punishment that is dominant, it is the fear of not being worthy of God's love that created the feelings of guilt which keeps the protagonist tied to the laws of his church and community for many years. Everything in Craig's life is related to God as the church presents Him and His wishes, particularly Jesus and his sacrifice for the sake of human race, every little aspect of the everyday has to be relevant to this sacrifice and everything it represents.

The visual medium is revelatory: the internal conflict is uncontainable on the paper, expressed on a multilevel, involving elements of the plot which reveal a cartography of the unconscious operation. Important progress in the course of the story takes place within a drawn delirium. Thus, the transition between childhood and adolescence is graphically portrayed through the visual metaphor of heaven. Little Craig is attending Sunday school being soulfully lectured on the idea of heaven and the eternity, on how tiny and unimportant life on earth is compared to the eternal bliss of heaven. The frame shifts from

¹⁶² William Shuter, "Sharing Our Humanity: The Psychological Power of the Catholic Mass," *American Imago* 63, no. 1 (2006). p. 9.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.* p. 10.

the classroom into a cloudy universe: “At that moment, I knew what I wanted... I wanted Heaven. And I grew up STRIVING for that world... an ETERNAL world... that would wash away my TEMPORARY misery”.¹⁶⁴ (Plate 4.4).



PLATE 4.4: *Blankets*, pp. 51-52

The child of seven or eight who treads carefully on the clouds is being transformed into an adolescent; naked and pure he is falling onto the clouds, safe from harm in this ideal world of imagination, which is so very different from the real world, the world of the classroom bullies and the abusing baby-sitter, the world which does not welcome the different: ‘This world is not my home; I’m only passing through’,¹⁶⁵ claims Craig, and so he lives his early puberty as if he was only a guest in this world, someone temporary who will soon be delivered to a better place. His passion for drawing seem to keep him away from God, (this is what His instructors tell Craig anyway) thus he decides to burn down all his drawings, destroy everything that gets between him and

¹⁶⁴ Thompson, *Blankets : An Illustrated Novel*. pp. 51-52.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.* p. 53.

his imagined and imaginary heaven, alter his identity for the sake of religion and the promised salvation. He packs all of his art and places it in an iron barrel to burn, as a sacrifice to God: 'I wanted to burn all my memories',¹⁶⁶ (Plate 4.5). What we see in the image is not the papers and drawings being burnt, but an internal conflict, with his own body being tormented and torn, shaken and exploding, all leading to a glorious full-page panel where nightmarish creatures escape from his mouth, as demons escape from afflicted souls upon the word of the Lord in the New Testament.



PLATE 4.5: *Blankets*, pp. 59-60

Adam Phillips points out how:

A capacity for guilt seems to define our sense of what is to be human; on this psychoanalysis and the Judaeo-Christian religions agree. Freud simply added the idea of

¹⁶⁶ Ibid. p. 59.

unconscious guilt –and the violence of guilt itself– to the picture, seeing it, towards the end of his life, as a fundamental obstacle to psychoanalytic cure; the patient desperately needs his symptoms as a punishment. His symptoms are his cure.¹⁶⁷

In this case we are presented with some dashing violence in the drawing of this sequence, there is fear and despair, a situation in which pain is a substitute for the solution that cannot be found, indeed a situation in which *the symptom is the cure* and if not a permanent cure (this would be impossible anyway) at least a temporary relief from pain and despair. A temporary solution which has the imposing power to establish itself as permanent if there is no appropriate or incidental timely escape.

Where is the real source of all this fear, torment and guilt? In the next page the session from the Sunday school continues, with the instructor from before during the same session, leaving the subject of heaven behind and moving forward in her argument:

But if you don't ask Jesus in your heart, you'll spend eternity in HELL. And Hell is the opposite of Heaven. It's the worst place you could ever imagine –where you are on fire, being BURNED and in constant PAIN... A pain that HURTS SO MUCH that the Bible says you will NEVER STOP SCREAMING or GRINDING your teeth. It's completely DARK and all around you are the sounds of other people screaming and MOANING. [...]. But worse of all, you can't find these people. You're separated forever. [...]. And you can hear them but you can't TALK to them or COMMUNICATE or CONSOLE each other in your pain.¹⁶⁸

It is after this long speech that the story returns to the initial sequence of the blankets fight and the father rebukes Craig for having argued with his brother,

¹⁶⁷ Adam Phillips, *On Flirtation* (London, etc.: Faber, 1994). p. 141.

¹⁶⁸ Thompson, *Blankets : An Illustrated Novel*. pp. 61-63.

as mentioned in the beginning of the chapter. In the structure of the novel, the sequence of the flashbacks is strategically built so as to bring forth the understanding of an enormous guilt, this monster of reproach that haunted Craig's childhood and drove him through to his adolescent years.

Shuter presents in his lengthy argument the pathology of the notion of sin and guilt and its very relation to psychoanalysis:

Psychoanalysis has much less to say about sin than about guilt, but about guilt it has a good deal to say. It is the capacity of the ego to observe, criticize, and accuse itself, activities exemplified in what the Church calls the "examination of conscience" and that led Freud to postulate a superego. Although guilt has its precursor in the fear of retaliation, its full internalization and structuralization are not completed until around age six, very close to the Church's age of discretion or reason. The superego is thus the latest of Freud's three mental agencies to be activated.¹⁶⁹

As a result, the mind of a child at the age of seven or eight who feels unforgivable –in a sense unclear– is bound to be burdened by a variety of disturbances, many of which are presented in *Blankets* through artful illustrations. The physiology of the medium makes these demonstrations clear and obvious, very piercing and convincing since it is able to aggravate a variety of sensory agents for the reader to perceive the totality of what the artist is trying to express. It is a matter of the immediacy of the medium, its capacity for expressing what there is to be expressed on more than one level, addressing more than one sensory receptor of the reader, expanding its penetrating and expressive ability. The imagery of guilt, redemption, punishment and suffering is as dominant as it is prevailing. *Blankets* is in this respect different from the previous works we have seen so far, because it relies on the fine graphic detail much more than the scenario and the plot to bring its message forth. In this case Craig cannot justify his suffering with the strong back-story of genocide

¹⁶⁹ Shuter, "Sharing Our Humanity: The Psychological Power of the Catholic Mass." pp. 8-9.

or a seriously ill brother. To many people his suffering cannot be understood, and many would agree that his upbringing was “standard”, if a bit strict, nothing serious to complain about, other than the baby-sitter incident (which could, so they argue, be a constructed memory) but in other aspects has been even privileged. Thompson is using the power of the graphic medium to defy any such potential arguments. What cannot be put into words is presented graphically with force and vigour, offering an insight to his very soul, not merely his memories and feelings, but his pain: pain described naked and brutal all through the story.

The rural community in which Craig is raised is sternly conservative. It is not only sexual love that is not permitted; any manifestation of love except for the love for Jesus is sinful and thus always condemned. By disobeying the rules one risks eternal damnation. The children of the story have grown up deprived of affection, offered the moral and psychological support they need only in the abstract idea of God. This support though comes burdened with the enormous load of sin. Little Craig tries to find comfort in his loneliness and social isolation by praying: ‘I’m sorry, God, for sneaking out of the cabin and lying and not reading the Bible and not witnessing to people and picking on my little brother and calling someone ‘ASS’ and drawing a lady without any clothes on that one time and disappointing my parents and everything else. Please, forgive me’.¹⁷⁰ But abstract entities cannot give practical forgiveness, and the guilt keeps weighing on him reinforced by his faith, declared in his everyday behaviour and decisions.

The concept of religion is vague and remote, and its doctrines in most cases depend almost exclusively on accepting something that we cannot understand. In his book *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, Erich Fromm notes that:

Frequently authoritarian religion postulates an ideal which is so abstract and so distant that it has hardly any connection with the real life of real people. To such ideals as ‘life after death’ or ‘the future of mankind’ the life and happiness of persons living here and now may be

¹⁷⁰ Thompson, *Blankets : An Illustrated Novel*. p. 87.

sacrificed; the alleged ends justify every means and become symbols in the names of which religious or secular 'elites' control the lives of their fellow man.¹⁷¹

The sacrifice of the individual for the benefit of the afterlife is increasingly obvious in the case of *Blankets*, particularly because the time of the narration is not a faraway dark-age era, and the place is not some primal, backward, fundamentalist community, but it is a representation of the American mid-western States of the late 1970s, roughly until the 1990s.

The truth is that this Evangelical Christian community of Wisconsin is presented here as conservative and fundamentalist as any oppressive regime could be. The question of American religious fundamentalism became even more urgent after the 9/11 attacks on a political level. The many faces of the USA are puzzling and seductive, leaving the spectator wondering how one country can combine the liberalism of New York, the liberality of Hollywood and the conservatism of Portland (to mention only few of the USA's different identities). The answer to this question lies somewhere in the foundation of the nation, the first to embrace multiculturalism and accept all nationalities and traditions as equal, forming a united nation comprising many oppositional, even conflicting elements. Poehlman, Uhlmann, Tannenbaum and Bargh approach the apparent domination of religious conservatism in the USA as such:

One reason for this disparity (although by no means the only one) is America's unique cultural heritage as a nation founded, to a significant degree, by Puritan-Protestants fleeing religious persecution. A self-selection process, in which especially devout Protestants left England to settle in the New World, may help explain the persistent prominence of religion in American life.¹⁷²

¹⁷¹ Erich Fromm, *Psychoanalysis and Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950). pp. 36-37.

¹⁷² T. Andrew Poehlman Eric Luis Uhlmann, David Tannenbaum, John A. Bargh, "Implicit Puritanism in American Moral Cognition," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 47(2011). p. 313.

This is an explanation of what materials created this amalgam, the melting pot that is the American nation but does not explain the mechanism that was used in order for one of them to dominate in current political thought. The observation and explanation of these reasons are going far beyond this study and should be the subject of social and political science, we need however to acknowledge the fact that conservatism in American society can have an effect not only on politics, but also on the psychological status of the individual (political conservatism is actually a consequence of this personal conservatism, as people are political beings and their personal ideology is at large reflected in the political tendencies of every given state).



91

PLATE 4.6: *Blankets*, p. 91

Back in *Blankets*, Craig reaches adolescence in the environment and with the mentality described above, until the day he meets Raina in a Baptist church camp. Her significance for the story becomes obvious from the way she is introduced. The centre left panel on a full page; all other panels overflowing with people, figures squashed in the small space, one over another. In her panel Raina alone turns her head and introduces herself in full simplicity: ‘I’m Raina’,¹⁷³ (Plate 4.6). She is the one and only and dominating the whole page with a face sweet and ingenuous. Craig finds her again hiding in the games room, wanting to be away from the crowd, this crowd that lives according to the letter of faith but so far from the spirit. They hide together, skipping chapel, sleeping instead. This is when the first teenage love occurs for Craig along with the first sensory awakening; watching Raina sleeping, in need and fear of touching her; a touch that would be so far from the doctrines of his faith, but so desirable and indeed essential for him:

I needed to touch her but I was hesitant. Her hair was silky and sprawled across her forehead. I smoothed it back and tacked it behind her ear. She was restful and yet her eyebrows were knit in a worried manner, forming a permanent furrow upon her brow. What was she worried about? The rec room furnace activated. A couple of clumsy clanks and then it eased into a soothing hum... a warm purr that wrapped itself about the room. I kept running my hand through her hair... through Raina’s hair... I couldn’t help it. It lulled her back to sleep.¹⁷⁴

All three pages of this sequence are lacking in panels, the figures of the two teenagers are running loose on the page. The absence of frame is a narrative device, according to Eisner, who considers the panel border as a significant aspect of the visual language.¹⁷⁵ In the case of the complete absence of frame he notes:

¹⁷³ Thompson, *Blankets : An Illustrated Novel*. p. 91.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 125-128.

¹⁷⁵ Will Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art: Principles and Practices from the Legendary Cartoonist* The Will Eisner Library: Instructional Textbooks (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 2008). pp. 44-45.

The non-frame speaks to unlimited space. It has the effect of encompassing unseen but acknowledged background. [...]. A frame's shape (or the absence of one) gives it the ability to become more than just a proscenium through which a comic's action is seen: it can become a part of the story itself. It can be used to convey something of the dimension of sound and emotional climate in which the action occurs, as well as contributing to the atmosphere of the page as a whole.¹⁷⁶

Thompson uses the absent frame frequently. This gives an almost supernatural fluency to his work. The reader is lost in a non-space, aware that the surroundings are implied, but losing themselves into the story which lies outside realism in a time-space of fantasy. Raina's sleep is lulling the reader as well, as they watch her body lie on the blank page. The page is being used as a canvas to demonstrate the significance of this 'holy' touch: the reserved body of Craig, the hands that hesitantly cling; the representation of a reluctant affection, much needed but still alien. This is the first trace of eroticism in the novel. Eroticism is the second more profound element in *Blankets*, the opposite of the strict religious doctrines, in constant conflict with those doctrines; a conflict that is creative and results in the building up of the plot, the design and Craig's character.

Georges Bataille, published in 1957 a controversial study of eroticism, discussing the pattern upon which the human race came to denounce sexuality as something filthy and impure and to replace it with social and religious laws which have created the repressed figure that is modern man: '...these interminable millennia correspond with man's slow shaking off of his original animal nature. He emerged from it by working, by understanding his own mortality and by moving imperceptibly from unashamed sexuality to sexuality with shame, which gave birth to eroticism'.¹⁷⁷ Eroticism is thus, according to Bataille a paraproduct of this collision between society and human nature, created by the force of the suppressed need for instincts to be expressed and

¹⁷⁶ Ibid. pp. 44-45.

¹⁷⁷ Georges Bataille, *Eroticism* (London ; New York: Boyars, 1987). p. 31.

externalised. Bataille, a French intellectual with a wide field of academic interests, was influenced by Freud and psychoanalysis, but also got involved with the surrealism movement (before falling out with the founding figure, André Breton), a movement which holds a peculiar relationship with psychoanalysis. Seeking to express an unbounded modernity, the surrealists were attracted to psychoanalysis and its ideas of the unconscious mind: 'its strange logic and associational principles; its lack of any grammar; its acceptance of contradiction; its ignorance of time, death, or negation; and its preference for an imagistic vocabulary'.¹⁷⁸ However, their approach remained at the field of the symbolic, and they refused, or ignored the aspect of interpretation, that is so crucial in psychoanalysis:

There was one great difference between psychoanalysis and surrealism, however. For Freud, words and images required interpretation, while the surrealists viewed words and images as incantations with magical power. Freud sought to translate dreams into the language of waking life; the surrealists criticized Freud for distinguishing dream and reality, instead of combining the two into an absolute reality or surreality.¹⁷⁹

This diversion of opinion is probably the reason for Freud's falling out with Breton as well, when upon the second's request for Freud to contribute one of his dreams for Breton's dream collection *Vases*, Freud responded rather coldly: '...a mere collection of dreams without the dreamers' associations, without the knowledge of the circumstances in which they occurred, tells me nothing, and I can hardly imagine what it could tell anyone'.¹⁸⁰ Freud's relationship with the surrealist movement remained complicated until the very end. About a year before Freud's death, Salvador Dalí visited him in London, where the Freud family had resettled to avoid the Nazi threat, and managed to

¹⁷⁸ Zaretsky, *Secrets of the Soul : A Social and Cultural History of Psychoanalysis*. pp. 159-160.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.* p. 161.

¹⁸⁰ Frederick B. Davies, "Three Letters from Sigmund Freud to Andréa Breton," *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 21(1973). p. 128.

impress him with his ‘fanatical eyes and his undoubted technical mastery’ (on this occasion Dalí drew his famous sketch of Freud).¹⁸¹

Returning to Bataille, in his study he demonstrates eroticism as a complex manifestation of the human need to satisfy an instinctual urge within the limitations of society. It is thusly related to the most basic elements of life: sexuality and death. Bataille writes: ‘eroticism is assenting to life even in death. Indeed, although erotic activity is in the first place an exuberance of life, the object of this psychological quest, independent as I say of any concern to reproduce life, is not alien to death’.¹⁸² This is an approach very close to the Freudian notion of Thanatos, the death drive that works in addition and in contention with Eros, the instinct towards life.

Eros and Thanatos are dominant in the living, and social structures are built so as to administrate these unruly urges of the human race. For this reason the so-called primitive societies have formed a number of taboos in order to prevent these urges going rampant. The taboo is something sacred, in the sense that its violation is not to be forgiven or forgotten, but will have an immediate effect upon the culprit. Societies need to be strict about the rules they impose, since the slightest deviation from the basic rules can lead to the collapse of the whole structure. Freud writes: ‘The individual who has violated a taboo becomes himself taboo because he possesses the dangerous aptitude of tempting others into following his example. He arouses envy; why should he be allowed to do things that are forbidden to others? So he is really *contagious* in so far as each example provokes imitation, and he must therefore be avoided himself’.¹⁸³ Breaking the rules is hard and it traditionally has led to the ostracising of the guilty party –or to social unrest and revolution.

The religious community of *Blankets* is living according to a strict religious law, that forbids indeed abolishes sexuality and all its manifestations outside safe, impermeable, holy matrimony. These restrictions are heavy, crippling for a teenage spirit that needs to express the overflow of feelings in a somatic way. The repression of the urges can lead to a number of neuroses, or

¹⁸¹ David Cohen, *The Escape of Sigmund Freud* (London JR Books 2009). pp. 179-180.

¹⁸² Bataille, *Eroticism*. p. 11.

¹⁸³ Sigmund Freud, *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia* (London: Penguin, 2005). pp. 36-37.

—case in point— to an artistic creation, complex and loaded with multiple meanings as *Blankets* is.



PLATE 4.7: *Blankets*, pp. 145-146

When Craig and Raina start their regular correspondence we see the same pattern, the same motif as before unfolding in their communication:

Our letters were a flirtation —from timid notes— to perfumed packages overflowing with flowers and poems, tape-recorded love songs, and sweet high school nothings. Most revealing was her handwriting... including indentions traced on each page from the page above. (She must have been pressing her pen hard). An alluring line looped her "l"s. Her "f"s where "l"s that instead of linking with the next letter fell. You probably wouldn't believe me... if I told you this was the ONE and ONLY time I

masturbated my senior year... but such are the will powers provided by faith.¹⁸⁴ (Plate 4.7).

During this sequence Craig's body is lying on the page as Raina's did before, flirting with the written material received from the girl. Her tormenting letters, the "I"s and the "F"s are drawn on the page, touching Craig's naked body in a sensory seduction. This body is skinny, wiry, tormented like the picture of a saint in an old hagiography. His act of masturbations is presented as a torment as well; it is a torment, indeed the boldest manifestation of sin and disobedience. The end finds him curling up like a baby on the floor, holding his head in obvious despair. Masturbation is an action absolutely forbidden and hatefully sinful. Craig dreads the breaking of this taboo, and this fear makes him fight between his bodily need and social repression. Freud writes on the related subject of repression:

The prohibition owes its strength –its obsessive character– to its relation with its unconscious opponent, the hidden undiminished desire, an inner necessity inaccessible to consciousness. The prohibition's capacity for transference and its power to reproduce itself reflects a process that coincides with unconscious desire, and is particularly facilitated by the psychological conditions of the unconscious. The instinctual desire is constantly displaced to elude whichever barrier it faces, and seeks to acquire surrogates –substitute objects and substitute actions– for that which is forbidden.¹⁸⁵

The need for a sensual touch is replaced by the lusciousness of Raina's handwriting; it is a transference that cannot be helped, since the direct expression of desire has been forbidden and suppressed. At this point of Craig's life, and of the story as well, Raina is obviously the most important aspect. It is graphically obvious, since every reference to her occupies a full page, a page length portrait of her gives away her significance for the hero. Her

¹⁸⁴ Thompson, *Blankets : An Illustrated Novel*. pp. 145-147.

¹⁸⁵ Freud, *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia*. p. 34.

influence comes between him and his faith, not by contradicting it, but by occupying the space that formerly belonged to faith. His religious faith is transformed to a mild way of worshiping Raina. Lisa Hoashi talks about the significance of the character of Raina and its distinct importance in the development of the story: 'Raina reawakens Craig's love for drawing and becomes his muse. Craig is already an artist; there is nothing he can do with an excess of emotion but put it into his art. As he falls in love with Raina and enters into a sexual relationship with her, he falls even further from his religion'.¹⁸⁶ Given the struggling character of his religion, there is no room for compromise, it is a conflict between eroticism and faith and faith does not seem strong enough to defeat love.



PLATE 4.8: *Blankets*, p. 312

¹⁸⁶ Lisa Hoashi, "Fluency in Form: A Survey of the Graphic Memoir," *The Missouri Review* 30, no. 7 (2007). p. 170.

When the two adolescents arrange a holiday in Raina's family home Craig gets to know her and her problems, even more, he gets to live with her, see her in her own space and understand her even better.

Back in the GUEST ROOM, I whispered a prayer of GRATITUDE to God... a PSALM, I suppose it's called. Thank you, God, for your perfect creation, with skin as soft and pale as moonlight, the bones beneath her skin tangling and rearranging. Rising along the iliac crest, and dipping into the clavicles. Thank you for the RHYTHM of her movements curling... sprawling. Her contours lapping like waves around the BLANKETS. She is yours. She is perfect. A TEMPLE with hair spilling over her temples. Pressed against her I can hear ETERNITY... hollow, lonely, spaces and currents that churn ceaselessly, and the fallen snow welcomes the falling snow with a whispered "HUSH".¹⁸⁷ (Plate 4.8).

Raina's body is drawn sensually, but in a respectful manner, as something sacred, something religiously holy. It is a transformation of religious faith into the aesthetic, however still using the religious idiom, expressing these new feelings the only way Craig has available. He cannot give up on religion all of a sudden, but he can use it to express his love for a girl that seems to him as sacred as the faith he had been devoted to before. Nonetheless, the new love, the love of the girl is in conflict with the forbidding religion. Craig's sanctifying Raina is the ultimate sin. His being unable to see it as a sin is a way of breaking loose from an oppressive ideology. It is a way of escaping the ever present notion of sin as well as guilt.

Interestingly, his loving Raina does not really contradict the basis of faith, which is love. It contradicts the social imposition of an oppressive religion. The original basis of the Christian faith is unconditional love, and all the restrictions have been imposed a posteriori by the several interpretations each doctrine has to present. Bataille underlines this contradiction: 'But in

¹⁸⁷ Thompson, *Blankets : An Illustrated Novel*. pp. 308-312.

Christianity there has been a dual process. Basically the wish was to open the door to a completely unquestioning love. According to Christian belief, lost continuity found again in God demanded from the faithful boundless and uncalculated love, transcending the regulated violence of virtual frenzy'.¹⁸⁸ The true basis of faith is loving God and to love thy neighbour as thyself. In order to rank human behaviour societies have struggled to impose rules and have turned those rules to unbreakable laws. According to Bataille:

We must know, we can know that prohibitions are not imposed from without. This is clear to us in the anguish we feel when we are violating the taboo, especially at the moment when our feelings hang in the balance, when the taboo still holds good and yet we are yielding to the impulsion it forbids. If we observe the taboo, if we submit to it, we are no longer conscious of it. But in the act of violating it we feel the anguish of mind without which the taboo could not exist. That is the experience of sin.¹⁸⁹

The result is that even though desire and sexual passion are the most natural feelings to arise between two teenagers, they are classified as sin in their own Unconscious. And the doctrine insists: 'Christianity rejected impurity. It rejected guilt without which sacredness is impossible since only the violation of a taboo can open the way to it';¹⁹⁰ as a result the two heroes still have to face the world and be accepted by their community, a community which is not prepared or willing to give way to the violation of the taboo. For the society 'it is equally clear why the violation of certain taboo prohibitions represents a social danger that must be punished or expiated by all members of society if it is not to damage everyone'.¹⁹¹ The sinner in a sense incorporates the sin, becomes one with it, as Freud points out: 'We know, without understanding it,

¹⁸⁸ Bataille, *Eroticism*. p. 118.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.* p. 38.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 121.

¹⁹¹ Freud, *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia*. p. 37.

that anyone who does what is forbidden, anyone who violates the taboo, becomes himself a taboo'.¹⁹²

Craig is aware of the fact that he himself is the object of impurity and not his actions. In order to expel this feeling of impurity he needs to open up to new interpretations of the world. Having returned at his own home after his long visit to Raina's, he is contemplating:

Socrates asks his disciple Glaucon to imagine human beings living within a dark cavern. [...]. And since childhood, humans have been prisoners bound at their neck and feet, facing a wall and unable to turn their heads. Behind them is a walled path, traversed by people carrying statues of animals and humans. And beyond that is a fire illuminating the cave. From the prisoners' perspective, all that can be seen are the shadows of these statues projected upon the wall by the fire; they think they are studying reality. [...]. Now if a prisoner was released from his binds, allowed to turn about and examine his surroundings; it'd be a shock to his entire system. In fact, he'd probably believe that what he'd previously known was the truth, and that his was a sort of heresy.¹⁹³

This shift from the religious discourse to the platonic allegory of the cave is indicative of an important shift in Craig's perception and understanding of the world. It is a radical shift towards philosophy, instead of religion; towards a new system of thinking. Having broken the taboo he is somehow an outcast from his society, even if nobody knows, he is like the prisoner who was set free to see reality and is now struggling to accept it knowing that none of his old comrades will ever believe him as long as they remain chained, facing the wall and the misleading shadows. The process is not easy, and it demands a psychic capacity for accepting change. Questioning the fundamentals, the whole system of belief with which he grew up is destructive as much as it is necessary. Erich Fromm, was a representative of the Frankfurt School which combined

¹⁹² Ibid. p. 36.

¹⁹³ Thompson, *Blankets : An Illustrated Novel*. pp. 495-500.

psychoanalysis with critical social theory,¹⁹⁴ and ‘rejected consumerism and mass culture as the moral basis of modern civilization, seeking either to return to nineteenth-century ideas of autonomy or to redefine those ideas in the context of mass democracy’,¹⁹⁵ who strayed from the Freudian orthodoxy of psychoanalysis, and has been rather critical towards its founder. His thought is influenced by Kant in search for a new ideal society. He notes:

Reason and freedom are interdependent according to Freud. If man gives up his illusion of a fatherly God, if he faces his aloneness and insignificance in the universe, he will be like a child that has left his father’s house. But it is the very aim of human development to overcome this infantile fixation. Man must educate himself to face reality. If he knows that he has nothing to rely on except his own powers, he will learn to use them properly. Only the free man who has emancipated himself from authority –authority that threatens and protects– can make use of his power of reason and grasp the world and his role in it objectively, without illusion but also with the ability to develop and to make use of the capacities inherent in him.¹⁹⁶

Craig manages to give up on this illusion of God via his art; he learns to transform the dead-ends into drawings which represent the colossal battle taking place inside him. Art is his gateway to a new understanding of the world. However, the old regime is not going to die without a fight. His social circle, albeit not knowing any details regarding his thoughts and feelings, can sense this change. And they battle against the change. One morning a member of his church talks to Craig about his decision to attend art school. More people join in the conversation trying to convince him that art school could be the doom of his soul:

¹⁹⁴ Zaretsky, *Secrets of the Soul : A Social and Cultural History of Psychoanalysis*. p. 235.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 164-165.

¹⁹⁶ Fromm, *Psychoanalysis and Religion*. p. 13.

A: Craig, I'd highly advise... That is, I WARN you flat outright NOT to go to art school. My brother went to art school, and they made him 'draw from life', you know. Yah, you know, he had to draw PEOPLE, but they... uh... didn't have any clothes on. It was like running right into the arms of TEMPTATION. Soon, he couldn't get enough NAKED people, so he got addicted to PORNOGRAPHY. And then, that wasn't enough either... which led... uh... Which led to the next logical step.

B: Killing people?

A: HOMOSEXUALITY,

B: Oh... How tragic.

C: The same thing happens at regular college. In one of my art classes, a student made a ceramic sculpture of a NAKED female torso.

B: Oh my.

C: No, I haven't got to the WORST part yet. The worst part is that during the critique, he proceeded to stroke and lick the nipples on the sculpture.

B: -gasp-

A: SICK, SICK MINDS.

C: Your only choice, Craig, is to attend CHRISTIAN college. The entire curriculum there is centered around Christ. In fact, they REJECT any text that strays from Biblical TRUTH.¹⁹⁷

The phobic presentation of the world of art school is intended to terrify Craig and make him abandon his plans to step away from this religious community. The same religious community that is presented as narrow-minded, petty and unforgiving. The gentleman whose brother leaped into homosexuality admits to not having talked to him in ten years: 'Don't want to ENCOURAGE him, you know?'.¹⁹⁸ Loving, understanding and forgiveness are not part of this narrow-minded mentality. It is fear and prejudice that are dominant in this way of

¹⁹⁷ Thompson, *Blankets : An Illustrated Novel*. pp. 514-518.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 519.

thinking. The last panel of the sequence (full page) finds Craig lying on the floor, holding a patchwork blanket made by Raina and offered as a gift to him during his visit. His body is stiff and his face expressionless. There are no words to describe his feelings and thoughts, but they are not necessary either.

The fact that in *Blankets* one can trace virtually no reference to the family's past is a most surprising element for an autobiography. Not one reference to who they are, where they came from and what they stand for. Their personal, familial history melts away, fades in the background, overshadowed by the big, unanimous idea of their community identity. Community values and beliefs are dominant throughout the book, and they match perfectly with the family's values and beliefs; it is as if the theological story –the plot played out by the limitations imposed upon the heroes from their church– has usurped the familial history, leaving a void where this should otherwise have been. The void however is covering up things (like a protective, or concealing blanket itself) that the narrator –and the writer– didn't want to disclose, or discarded as unimportant. Psychoanalysis will tell us that the things not mentioned are at times more important than the manifest content. The question of why Craig Thompson decided to write an autobiography located only in a peculiar sense of the “present” is actually valuable as to how the concept of autobiography is manipulated here in order for the writer to narrate a story of pain, grief, guilt and anxiety. This undoubtedly is the story of his life, but it seems to be narrowly focused, on one aspect.

Indeed, Craig's story refers exclusively to his own time as a child, adolescent and young adult, an excluding “now”, which progresses through the book, manifesting the sense of the past only inasmuch as it utilises the technique of flash back (with scenes from various points of his own personal past) to juxtapose a similar thematic and give a “time depth” to his narration. Other than that we do not read anything about his parents or grandparents, any stories which shaped his ancestors and as a result himself. Unlike *Epileptic*, the parental past is absent. Unlike *Maus* which is almost entirely located in the past, *Blankets* give no credit to familial –or indeed social and political– history. The questions that arose above, about the origins of fundamentalism, the historical justification for the domination of Christian conservatism in the USA, these questions never arise in the book. Thomson is not discussing a

general phenomenon of young adults trying to escape a stifling social environment. He is talking about his personal story, making his art a means of expressing the oppression he suffered, which oppression to some extent he presents as exclusive to him (and partly to Raina, who is his co-protagonist, a female alter ego partially created to share the burden).

It is the personal history which is deemed of more importance than the social history. We are shown the little incidents of childhood, all of which illustrate the mechanism of repression (repression which is partly self-inflicted as a result of the oppression the protagonist suffered) and the enforcement of the ideas of purity and sin. Every incident of his early childhood is a testimony to the guilt creating mechanism. Every such testimony is then associated with an obstacle in his later life which the narrator can overcome only by overcoming the initial trauma. The novel acts like the Freudian “talking cure”, in the form of a “drawing cure”; Thomson is putting his unconscious on the paper, drawn with thin and bold lines, re-shaped in an artistic form that allows him to express the vague, the bits and pieces that even he cannot understand, of what has traumatised him regarding his childhood.

His omnipotent God is ever present, in his most intimate moments, his most exclusive thoughts. When he first settles in the guest room in Raina’s house, Craig notices the portrait of Jesus hanging from the wall in Raina’s bedroom, and it was ‘the same portrait of Jesus that had hung in [his] parent’s room’.¹⁹⁹ This triggers a flashback to his childhood, when his parents reproach him for a piece of drawing the bus driver found in the waste basket and handed to them.

-Do you remember what it was?

-Um... war drawings?

-No... On the other side.

-A lady... without any clothes on.

-Yes. Naked.

-The body is beautiful, Craig, but not like that. God created us, but sin has made us impure.

-I’m sorry.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid. p. 201.

-How do you think what you did makes us feel?

-MAD?

-No. Sad. Because God gave you a talent and we don't want you to use it for the devil. How do you think Jesus feels?

-[Sobbing] S...sad?

-Yes. SAD. Because it hurts him when you sin.²⁰⁰

At the end of this dialogue, when these last words are pronounced, Jesus in the portrait breaks in tears, his mild features stained with sorrow; he turns his head away from Craig for Craig has sinned and is no longer worthy of his love. The child reaches for the portrait in agony, but he can only see the back of Jesus' head; he looks behind and sees the awkward shaped body of the naked lady approaching. In the next panel the naked lady is slowly transformed into Raina.

He has projected this traumatic memory of the past into the present, but the resolution has not been achieved yet. It is five chapters later that the resolution occurs. It is when Craig and Raina spend the night together, engaging in sexual activity, and Craig gets the chance to admire the female body, to touch and smell and see it without the fear of sin. As Raina falls asleep, Craig narrates: 'I studied her. Aware that she'd been crafted by a DIVINE ARTIST. Sacred, perfect and unknowable'.²⁰¹ With some reserve, he turns towards the wall and the portrait of Jesus. The previously disappointed Jesus is now turning back into his portrait. He faces Craig fully and smiles to him with all his divine glory.

Thus the conflict has been resolved; not the conflict between Craig and God, but his internal conflict in which he has been trapped from his childhood on. He in a sense transfers the appreciation for the godly to his first sexual partner, an experience sacred indeed, so sacred as to be made equal with the divine experience he has experienced before in his church. Christopher Bollas, a contemporary psychoanalyst who in the 1990s returned to Freud revisiting and modernising classical theories, writes how: 'The search for symbolic equivalents to the transformational object, and the experience with which it is identified, continues in adult life. We develop faith in a deity whose absence,

²⁰⁰ Ibid. pp. 203-208.

²⁰¹ Ibid. p. 429.

ironically is held to be as important a test of man's being as his presence'.²⁰² What Craig worships in the extract above is not Raina herself, but the divine beauty of Raina, the abstract sense of the eternal female that is sacred and pure –unlike the idea he had so far that femininity is filthy and foul.

Alone with his thoughts, after Raina has fallen asleep, Craig contemplates:

I realised that I didn't want to be ANYWHERE else. For once, I was more THAN CONTENT being where I was. But I couldn't sleep. So I listened. I heard Raina's breathing, and beneath that, her heart beating... and beyond that, the gentle murmur of spirits in the room. I even though I could hear the snow falling outside. And the sounds wove into a rhythm of hushed orchestration – spiraling me into slumber.²⁰³

The design of the sequence of this narration is abstract, fragmentary. Peculiar shapes and chaotic spirals, feelings and senses and sounds and smells have been visualised, small angels fly around the room. The young couple is surrounded by shapes rather than things, rather than the reality. It is probably because they have shifted above their reality, they have sinned, but they do not consider this to be a sin anymore, instead they have incorporated the feelings and impressions into the religious narration with which they have been raised and made them part of it.

The love story between Craig and Raina is not a happy ending. It does not have to be either, as it is a story about coming of age, disappointment, and broken relationships. Raina and their love story has worked as a catalyst to make things change, to force Craig into realising the difference between the life he wanted to live and the life he was forced to live. The end of their relationship is presented as taking place at his own volition. He is calling to say goodbye. Then he gathers all of Raina's memorabilia except for the quilt blanket she made for him and he burns them, just as he had burned earlier all of

²⁰² Christopher Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object : Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known* (London: Free Association Books, 1987). p. 17.

²⁰³ Thompson, *Blankets : An Illustrated Novel*. pp. 432-436.

his artwork to dedicate himself to God. He breaks loose from all of his past. Because Raina, even though she has been the force to make him change –or because of it– is still part of his past.



PLATE 4.9: *Blankets*, pp. 581-582

He moves out of his parents' house soon after his twentieth birthday. The epilogue of the book is a return story. He is coming back to his parents' house for a Christmas holiday, long after he has made all the necessary changes to completely separate from his past life. This time the family house is presented as more welcoming and warm than ever before. His childhood memories, deprived of the sense of vulnerability deriving from the complete lack of control over his life, seem less scary and less horrible. He finds the blanket he hid so long ago and he sees Raina through the eyes of an adult. He can now remember without pain and fear. He pays her an illustrated tribute, in the form of four whole page drawings of their embrace. An embrace that saves him and her from the forces of evil, and delivers them into sensual bliss.

In the last few pages Craig goes for a walk on the fresh snow: 'How satisfying it is to leave a mark on a blank surface. To make a map of my

movement... no matter how temporary',²⁰⁴ (Plate 4.9). He has now written himself into the story as the cartographer who maps his own territory, creating his own path in life. He is running around the total whiteness, leaving marks of his footsteps, marks of his own course in life. And it would be temporary on the fresh snow, but it is permanent and documented on the page, on the book he wrote in order to be able to inscribe this path in life. His autobiography has become possible through his art. The comics medium has given him the means to narrate his life, to articulate his life. The result is not merely the story of a boy in the Midwestern states of America. It is the feelings, the perception, the point of view, the critical eye of this boy, presented through the pen of the adult Thompson.

²⁰⁴ Ibid. pp. 581-582.

CHAPTER FIVE

Persepolis: The Ever Foreign

Marjan Satrapi was born in 1969, an Iranian girl in the years before Iran changed radically due to the political and cultural effects of the Islamic revolution in 1979; she grew up in a different era altogether. Brought up in a well-to-do, middle-class family, politically active and claiming roots to the Qajar Dynasty (the royal family which ruled Iran until 1925), she carries a strong familial history. Until the age of ten she had been sheltered by her loving, liberal parents, unaware of the political turmoil that was to follow and blissfully ignorant of the viciousness of authoritarian regimes. A normal childhood with normal expectations –what we deem normal in a western context, given that the European perception on normality has always been different from the one in the Middle East, and even Europe has only enjoyed a long and lasting period of peace for the last seven decades at most. Unaware of her family’s story, which is interwoven to Iran’s political history, Marjan spent her early childhood fantasising about God and becoming a Prophetess, playing and being a child.

The 1979 revolution and what followed changed her life as it changed the lives of millions of Iranian people, completely twisted her future which had been planned on the false assumption that peace and stability could be taken for granted. In her lifetime she was forced to leave Iran twice; once in her early teens, to return four years later completely psychologically shattered, having suffered a mental and physical breakdown. The second time she left in 1994, as a mature young woman; with an intention and purpose in life, with alert awareness of what she was leaving behind and where she was going, she made a conscious choice to take her life into her own hands.

Satrapi lived in France where she met David Beauchard (*Epileptic*’s author, David B.) under whose guidance she started her career as a graphic novelist. It is easy to spot the impact of her apprenticeship with Beauchard: her graphic style, although distinctly hers, has something of the feverish lines and tumultuous design of *Epileptic*. She published *Persepolis* in four volumes (*Persepolis I*, *Persepolis II*, *Persepolis III* and *Persepolis IV*) between 2000

and 2003 in French. The book was a publishing success, and it was adapted for the big screen in 2007; a film which stayed true to the content of the book, both in terms of plot and design, but also in the spirit, the pace and the atmosphere.

The 2008 omnibus Vintage edition of the graphic novel, under the title *Persepolis*, is divided in two parts *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* and *Persepolis II: The Story of a Return*. It constitutes Satrapi's autobiography, from her traumatic childhood during the Islamic revolution, through her teens in exile in Austria to her return to Iran until her final departure to France at the age of twenty five. The four parts that constitute the whole of the narration are not fragmented or disassociated, they are instead very coherent and tied together as if the entire book was composed in one go, thoroughly planned and carefully executed to never permit any vacuum space, not a blurred line where one could locate a doubtful gap, any discontinuity translated as incoherence to raise suspicions regarding the authenticity of the story and the absolute truth of this personal narration. In this case it is not the factual authenticity and truth I am talking about, it is mostly the psychological authenticity that distinguishes between fiction and autobiography. Satrapi presents a most personal narration, demonstrating a rare confidence in her internal truth, even when she delineates moments of crisis and a deep loss of self-control.

Satrapi's autobiographical and psychoanalytic truths are synchronised, and even though we can trace the former conflicts between the self and the external forces in the text, it is obvious that these conflicts have resulted in building up a strong personal identity, resulting in a rich narration to include a significant amount of psychoanalytic elements: fantasies and day-dreaming, a thorough descent into the familial past and an understanding of how this history has influenced the development of the family members.

Edward Said, a man balancing delicately between two radically different worlds, the (constructed) Orient and the (constructing, in his own opinion) Occident, a little like Satrapi has been doing for most of her life, starts his *On Writing a Memoir* by saying 'All families invent their parents and children, give each of them a history, character, fate, and even a language'.²⁰⁵ His own family has been affected by the middle east conflict, by the history and politics of this brittle corner of the world, and he has experienced history in

²⁰⁵ Edward W. Said, Moustafa Bayoumi, and Andrew a Rubin, *The Edward Said Reader* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000). p. 400.

the making, the raw forces of political processes, but he does not hesitate to talk about invention, about the unique human ability to mould their perception and understanding of their past, and of the past of their loved ones, in order to fit it into a comfortable, or comforting personal narration. Said does not imply that the “history, character, fate and language” appointed to them are fake, but that they are selected to serve a purpose, the purpose of understanding how (real) external factors affect their lives. It is a process engineered cunningly by the human unconscious to make things matter, to make them important.

Satrapi’s story, presented in the form of a comics book is not only told, but re-embodied in the drawn characters’ figures, coming back to life, acquiring importance through their sketched bodies and the real torments they represent. In relation to Satrapi, Hillary Chute asks a very interesting and precise question:

I am interested in this notion of ethics as it applies to autobiographical graphic narrative: what does it mean for an author to *literally* reappear –in the form of a legible, drawn body on the page– at the site of her inscriptional effacement? Graphic narratives that bear witness to author’s own traumas and those of others materially retrace inscriptional effacement; they reconstruct and repeat in order to counteract. It is useful to understand the retracing work of graphic narratives as ethical repetitions (of censored scenarios).²⁰⁶

What is really the function of this body, a body reincarnated on the paper ready to speak out its truths and narrate its story? How does this non-flesh, yet visual entity represent the person whose spirit it is meant to embody? Putting oneself into an autobiographical narration is by default an attempt to carve a personal history. To set it straight, to untangle the disturbances, and shed light to every dark corner (this does not mean that the goal is always achievable). During this process, the author has to reinvent not only their own persona, but everybody else’s too (parents, children, friends, enemies) and

²⁰⁶ Hillary Chute, "The Texture of Retracing in Marjane Satrapi's "Persepolis", " *The Feminist Press at the City University of New York* 36, no. 1/2 (2008). p. 93.

install them into history –which demands that they reinvent history as well. In the graphic medium the author creates the historical and visual context in a complex language, which can exploit oral and visual memories, is a product of research and remembering.

Julia Kristeva, a Bulgarian-French scholar who has studied a variety of subjects in the humanities, some of which are: philosophy, linguistics, sociology, literary criticism and psychoanalysis, belongs to the post-war modern wave of psychoanalysis. As the twentieth century moved from conflict to reconciliation, with scientific progress rampaging, things changed for the psychoanalytic movement:

The great post-Freudian texts of the seventies preached the relative insignificance of the individual per se. Although their aim was to enhance personal life by insisting on its social and political dimensions, they inadvertently ushered in group-oriented theories that supplanted analysis. As one great slope of the psychoanalytic edifice disappeared into psychopharmacology, the other slid into identity politics.²⁰⁷

The French branch of psychoanalysis, in the 1960s and 1970s (thanks to the influence of Jacques Lacan, Jean Laplanche, Jean-Bertrand Pontalis and others) is taking a more autonomous direction to the Anglo-Saxon model, a more theoretical direction, and Kristeva is nourished in this French intellectual climate which is less antagonistic to the Freudian ideas, more willing to move them forward than to contradict them.

Kristeva argues that the process of psychoanalysis constitutes a real ‘metamorphosis that leads us, at the termination of treatment, to regard language as body and body as language’.²⁰⁸ I would suggest that the significance of the drawn bodies in a graphic novel is of the same quality as that which Kristeva is talking about, and though of course it would be wrong to

²⁰⁷ Zaretsky, *Secrets of the Soul : A Social and Cultural History of Psychoanalysis*. p. 337.

²⁰⁸ Julia Kristeva, *In the Beginning Was Love : Psychoanalysis and Faith*, European Perspectives (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987). p. 34.

equate flesh bodies with all their marvellous capabilities of expression with paper and ink bodies, I believe that there are enough similarities to allow the comparison. The drawn character can be uniquely expressive in a distinct virtual body-language which forces you to produce verbal language (even if only mentally) when reading into them; thus this sequential presentation of bodies *is* language after all. It incorporates body language, visual language, the language of colours and shapes, and every little detail that allows for multiple levels of reading and meaning investment. Talking about the process of analysis, Kristeva continues:

All plenitude turns out to be inscribed upon a “void” which is simply what remains when the overabundance of meaning, desire, violence, and anguish is drained by means of language. “A tiger leaps upon a mound.” Approaching his patients with the aid of a model derived from his own analysis, the therapist is able to apprehend psychic structures unknown to psychiatric nosography. He gives meaning to the “emptiness” of the “borderline” while teaching the patient to cope with the emptiness within self understanding that is the original source of our anguish and moral pain.²⁰⁹

In the making of a graphic novel, the artist (like every artist) is facing the emptiness of the paper, like a white abyss that is looking straight into them. To fill in this paper with shapes and meaning, to make understanding (and meaning) happen through this blank piece of paper, the artist has to structure the content in a psychologically sensible and productive manner.

A graphic novel like *Persepolis* is particularly interesting from various points of view. Even though most of the action takes place in a space culturally alien to the western paradigm, an eastern tradition which needs to be addressed in different terms than the western perception, I would claim that it is not alien in essence. In this point of course a major issue is raised, on how a European researcher can claim to understand in any other level than the dipole

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

European/Non-European. Although, at this stage, I would prefer to avoid the unavoidable discussion about Orientalism, the question keeps coming into shape: is the researcher constructing a cultural fantasy along with their analysis? And the answer is obviously “yes”, because the researcher is as much a human being as anybody else, and their personal understanding of the world has to be part of their thesis –they do not have an option. Said blames the Orientalist that ‘[he] makes it his work to be always converting the Orient from something into something else: he does this for himself, for the sake of his culture, in some cases for what he believes is the sake of the Oriental’,²¹⁰ and elsewhere: ‘Orientalism, therefore, is not an airy Europe fantasy about the Orient, but a created body of theory and practice in which, for many generations, there has been a considerable material investment’.²¹¹ Trying to apply Freud and psychoanalysis to *Persepolis* could be deemed an Orientalist sin, an attempt to reclaim the oriental and cast it into a European line of theory that does not apply to an eastern mentality. To this attempt, however, Edward Said himself, seems to bring absolution. In his lecture entitled *Freud and the Non-European*, in 2001, at the Freud Museum of London, Said explains why Freud is important across cultures and time:

Freud was an explorer of the mind, of course, but also, in the philosophical sense, an overturner and a re-mapper of accepted or settled geographies and genealogies. He thus lends himself especially to rereading in different contexts, since his work is all about how life history offers itself by recollection, research and reflection to endless structuring and restructuring, in both the individual and the collective sense. That we, different readers from different periods of history, with different cultural backgrounds, should continue to do this in our readings of Freud strikes me as nothing less than a vindication of his work’s power to instigate new thought, as well as to illuminate situations that he himself might never have dreamed of.²¹²

²¹⁰ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin Books, 2003). p. 67.

²¹¹ Said, Bayoumi, and a Rubin, *The Edward Said Reader. Orientalism*, p. 73.

²¹² Edward W. Said, *Freud and the Non-European* (London: Verso, 2003). p. 27.

Thus, I believe that that discussing *Persepolis* in the same context as *Maus*, *Epileptic*, *Blankets* and *Fun Home* is not a disservice to the imagined and constructed Orient, but an asset to seeing how the theory behaves when out of the standard confinement of the (equally constructed) West. The fact that the familial culture of the Satrapis and most of their social circle was obviously westernised and with a very clear sense of belonging in the western mentality is making this analysis even more challenging –as it bears the danger to completely overlook the Iranian aspect of the book, and focus on the familiar western. However, the Iranian part of the book is what gives it its depth of conflict, and it would not have been easy to ignore it, even if I had attempted to.

As the Satrapis are presented from the beginning of the book, it is clear that their way of life is going to clash with the fundamentalist regime Ayatollah Khomeini established after 1979. This eminent clash becomes actually even more pronounced, and significant when seen through the prism of two opposing cultures, pre and post 1979. The new order established in Iran after the revolution is not only oppressive and terrifying, but it is different in terms of culture. Marji is a young girl growing up torn between the familial westernised perception of the world and the most conservative, reactionary, theocratic state, creating a dichotomy of understanding the world and her own identity as a female and as a citizen. The formation of her identity depended on this conflict. The extremities of the internal and external war are an important factor as well. It is an environment with more than one enemy, it is the external invading force (Iraq) and the internal threatening regime, which tortures, executes and domineers.

During the first part of the book victims of both enemies are presented graphically, in more or less grim detail, adding to a long list of traumata, all of which have been important for the construction of identity of the major character. The complexity of the subject in question creates a narration making full use of the advantages provided by the comics medium, according to Nima Naghibi and Andrew O'Malley:

The gutters are empty spaces in the text that can either be filled with easy answers provided by the dominant ideology or they can function as sites of *aporia*. In the gutters between the panels of *Persepolis*, the reader has to interact with and interpret historical, political, and cultural silences; this is the space in which new meanings that deflate the overdetermined categories of East and West have the potential to be generated.²¹³

In the language of comics, the “gutter” represents the empty space between two panels, the place where according to McCloud ‘human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea’,²¹⁴ which is part of the process of closure, ‘the phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole’.²¹⁵ If I was allowed to use bold language, I would say that the gutters are where magic happens. It is this non-place where all the meaning is being synthesised, facts and images fall in place, and meaning, coherence come out. It is the space where the reader has the freedom to add a small piece of themselves, to include their own interpretation into the context. Comics is a unique medium in this way, it is structurally not only allowing, but demanding from the reader to do part of the job, to provide the links, the answers even, gives them the liberty to put themselves in the appointed blank spaces, and take out a meaning that is personal and sentimental, creating a sense of stronger attachment. Comics is a medium for the individual, and the gutter is what creates this sense of personal space, that allows for all these personal interpretations. Even in *Persepolis* which is a realistic story, with a tight plot, the gutters function as a place where the reader can produce meaning, and contemplate the serious questions of morality, culture and humanity, that are set by the author.

The first chapter of *Persepolis*, entitled ‘The Veil’, is introducing the young heroine and her family, starting in 1980, shortly after the beginning of the ‘cultural revolution’ which led to a radical change of everyone’s way of

²¹³ Nima Naghibi and Andrew O'Malley, "Estranging the Familiar: "East" And "West" In Satrapi's *Persepolis* 1," *ESC: English Studies in Canada* 31, no. 2-3 (2005). p. 246.

²¹⁴ Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994). p. 66.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 63.

life. Marji addresses the reader from the first panel of the first page: ‘This is me when I was 10 years old. This was in 1980’.²¹⁶ This first panel is the smallest of the entire page, as small as the little girl depicted on it. Marji is presented wearing a black veil which covers her head –but not her face– and shoulders, with her arms crossed and a sulky expression on her face. In this small first panel she is alone. In the next panel on the right, four more girls are depicted, as immobile, covered and moody as herself: ‘And this is a class photo. I’m sitting on the far left so you don’t see me...’,²¹⁷ (Plate 5.1).



PLATE 5.1: *Persepolis*, p. 3

²¹⁶ Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis* (London: Vintage 2008). p. 3.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

The stagnancy of the first row of panels changes below. A completely dark panel follows, showing a passionate demonstration; people wearing black clothes in a black background, only the outline of their figures, their faces and clenched fists, raised to protest are marked out: 'In 1979 a revolution took place. It was later called "The Islamic Revolution"'.²¹⁸ Immediately the focus returns in the school yard, where primary school girls are ordered to cover themselves with the veil and they then just use it as a toy during playtime without realising its given significance: 'We didn't really like to wear the veil, especially since we didn't understand why we had to'.²¹⁹ The architecture of the page is presented with a wave pattern, passiveness and climaxes, creating an anguished first impression, from the absolute stillness of a photographic moment to the potentially violent protest and from the passively aggressive order for girls to wear the veil, to their dionysiac frenzy when they use the veil for all sorts of purposes instead of covering their heads. The last long panel occupies the entire last row of the first page. It is a playground, but there is something anguished in it. It is not the expected picture of a typical school for the western observer; the graphic representation of the scene implies something that defies simple notions. Despite not being detailed, the drawing creates a pattern of instability, agitation and tumult in complete contradistinction with the first row of the page, the school photos. The veil that dominates the very first instance of the narration has been reduced to a mere frolic. This and the values it carries with it, its religious and cultural significance are being mocked, and rejected. The first page of *Persepolis* is pretty much an abstract of the story to follow. A story of concealment, violence, oppression and personal liberation.

The first few pages of the book represent the first impression of the Islamic Revolution as this is experienced by little Marji, and her own way of understanding the situation around her. The child has to witness the change, and more importantly the effects of this change on the people she mostly loves, trusts and looks up to. Her parents are the filter through which she perceives her reality, feeling their fear and agony. This feeling is ambivalent for young Marji, since she cannot fully comprehend the importance of what is happening

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

around her, and the imminent consequences in her everyday life and future, thus her despair cannot be as grave as her parents' who as adults have to think through the consequences and the results of this change of the status quo. However, the child can probably sense much stronger vibrations of worry and panic. Marji cannot comprehend the change in an intellectual way, she can however sense that it is awfully important for her parents, and this has an important impact on herself and her understanding of the situation. From the moment she gets the feeling that something is wrong, fear, defences and coping mechanisms start building up.

A few pages later, Marji describes how a German journalist took a photo of her mother while she was demonstrating against the new regime's decision to impose the veil to all women. The photo was published all over Europe and even in one magazine in Iran. Her mother had to dye her hair blonde and only walk outside the house wearing sunglasses in the fear of recognition. Marji witnesses this and is definitely overcome by anxiety for her mother's ordeal, and fear for the potential arrest of her mother as an opponent of the regime. The mother is very much aware of the dangers, and this is why she tries to disguise her identity, but her daughter has to face the fear of having her mother attacked, arrested, taken away from her, tortured or even killed on account of this incident. For her (at her age) all these are not just a fear, but a permanent reality where horrible things happen to a loving parent. She cannot rationalise, understand that by taking precautions the danger can be managed. For her the danger is ever present.

The last panel of this sequence shows her mother covered in her coat with her blond hair and dark glasses, walking in an ominous darkness –that is again a completely black background– having stern bearded faces hovering over her head, supernaturally large heads, detached from a body, where she is not only being stalked, but also judged, frowned upon and humiliated. I need to remind the reader here that even though I am talking about the mother, it is the point of view of the author that we really see now, the closest available to the little girl the story is about. Thus the memory expressed on this particular instance is remembered as a threat, an ongoing fear for the mother who is drawn to be protected, even self-protected, but in fact only as a realisation of the child which probably fantasized about protecting the mother from the external dangers. Being unable to protect the mother is perceived as failure for

little Marji. This theme will occur again later when Marji will find herself on the streets and unable to take care of her own self, as a reflection of a situation when she didn't manage to be strong enough to protect the mother against an ominous enemy.

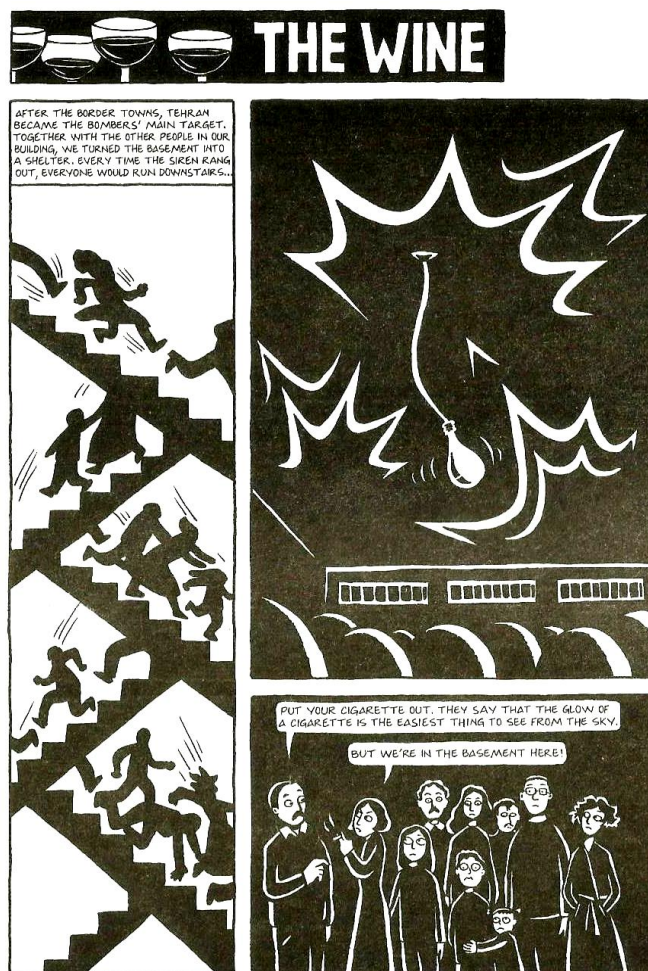


PLATE 5.2: *Persepolis*, p. 103

As the book goes on, Marji grows up before the eyes of the reader. She is approaching adolescence, and her life is being continuously stigmatised by the political developments in her country, every step of the way. Her narration is compelling, convincing, emotional and rational at the same time. The chapter entitled *The Wine* starts during an Iraqi attack: ‘After the border towns, Tehran became the bombers’ main target. Together with the other people in our building, we turned the basement into a shelter, every time the siren rang out, everyone would run downstairs’,²²⁰ (Plate 5.2).

²²⁰ Ibid. p. 103.

The page composes of three panels, one long but narrow vertical taking up all the left side, and the other two, one of top on the other, on the right side. The left one is showing people running down a staircase, the lines producing shapes, enclosing the running people, trapping them; their panic is obvious, the restrain even more. The top right panel shows a light bulb that hangs by a long cord from the ceiling, shaking violently as the attack is being carried out. On the tiniest panel down on the right, all the neighbours stand still in a dark background:

- Put your cigarette out, they say that the glow of a cigarette is the easiest thing to see from the sky.
- But we're in the basement here!²²¹

This dialogue between Marji's parents sounds like a joke, but it is due to the paranoia overcoming people (even reasonable, clever, open-minded people, as they have been presented before) when their life and their loved ones' lives are being threatened.



PLATE 5.3: *Persepolis*, p. 104

²²¹ Ibid.

The following page has a similar vertical panel, only now people run upstairs as furiously as before. The raid is over, and everyone wants to make sure that their relatives and friends are safe. On the right side of the page there is another vertical panel, a little wider: total black background, waist-up figures holding a phone receptor, struggling to connect with their loved ones. Some figures seem relieved, some in despair, some receiving good news and some holding on to a dead receiver (Plate 5.3). These grim pictures are the introduction to how war is changing the everyday life once again.

Everything, from behaviours to interior decoration has to be altered to fit the new state of being. To fit with the fact that the country is under attack, externally and internally. At the same time, life has to go on. People do the best they can to keep their sanity, by continuing to be people. They celebrate, and they go behind the authorities' back, and they disobey the strict rules imposed by the rulers. They are throwing parties, and playing cards, and crushing their own grapes to make wine at their own risk. Satrapi describes a party thrown for the birth of her cousin. Everyone is dancing and having fun, until the sirens start wailing. The new mother panics, pushes her baby to young Marji's arms and starts running to safety. The whole sequence is presented in total black backgrounds –a feature Satrapi uses to add more significance and depth to strategically dramatic moments in her narration. Marji the narrator explains: 'I found myself with the newborn baby we had been celebrating in my arms. Her mother had already abandoned her. Since that day, I've had my doubts about the so-called "maternal instinct"'.²²² This is an incident of limited scale, and it will not be followed up later in the story. But for some reason it was important for the author to bring it up. Not as a description of the situation during the war, but as a point about human character. She has been defined by this incident, and it is so important as to be brought back to life during her narration, even though it is not particularly important in the storyline. The face of young Marji, astonished, wide-eyed, staring blankly while holding a plainly drawn baby, which even that way is looking up for her as a cry for help and attachment, is one of the points where real forces of the unconscious have been deposited on the paper.

²²² Ibid. p. 107.

In the case of the graphic medium content as well as form are crucial to decide the final outcome of the story in terms of perception. The medium in which the story is being packaged is not only a matter of taste and aesthetics, but it is very decisive as to what the reader is going to understand from the narrated story. How each scene and episode of the story is presented to the audience is significant because the feeling communicated adds on to the actual sequence. *Persepolis* is a very solid narration of a childhood during an unstable era in Iran. It could have been shown and expressed in a number of ways and a number of media. It was initially written as a graphic novel and later cinematised for the big screen. The film is based on the tropes and style of the graphic novel, but the element of the animation (as well as the sound effects) do contribute to the building up of a new narration, which is not a new story, but is a new perception, more freely developed from scene to scene, without the thorny transitions the reader is forced to encounter while reading the book. The moving image takes away a lot of the ferocity of the static image, one film scene does not have the time to settle in and provoke the thoughts, feelings and implications aroused by the single panel.

One example of this function of the static panel we can see at the beginning of the chapter “The Party”, describing the fall of the Shah’s regime. Satrapi recounts: ‘After Black Friday, there was one massacre after another. Many people were killed. The end of the Shah’s reign was near’,²²³ (Plate 5.4). These three sentences occupy two long rectangular panels one beneath another. The first one is filled with an army of dead people, cramped in the narrow, restricted space of the panel in an orderly manner: eyes wide open, mouths wide open, but thus arranged as if they just came out of a factory, industrialised, multiplied, all looking alike in a horrendous composition.

The panel underneath the first one is as black, but dominated by white figures in a straight line, one after another, one pushing another until the last one pushes the Shah away. Once again the strict geometrical order is representative of the austerity of the regime. The same continues in the next page where the Shah attempts his last reformation in order to remain in power.

²²³ Ibid. p. 40

THE PARTY

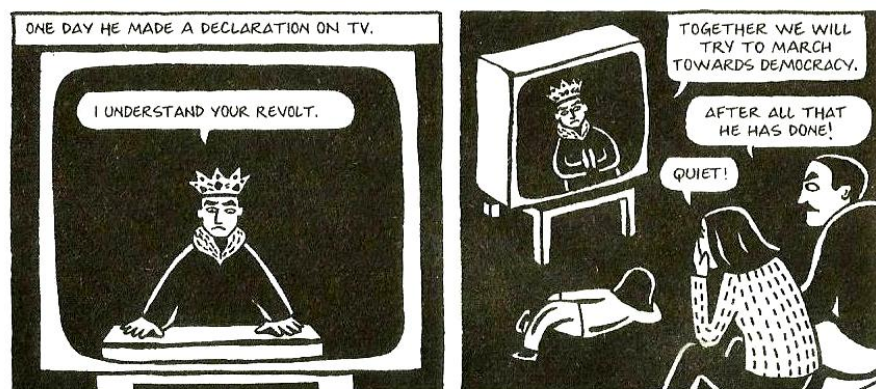
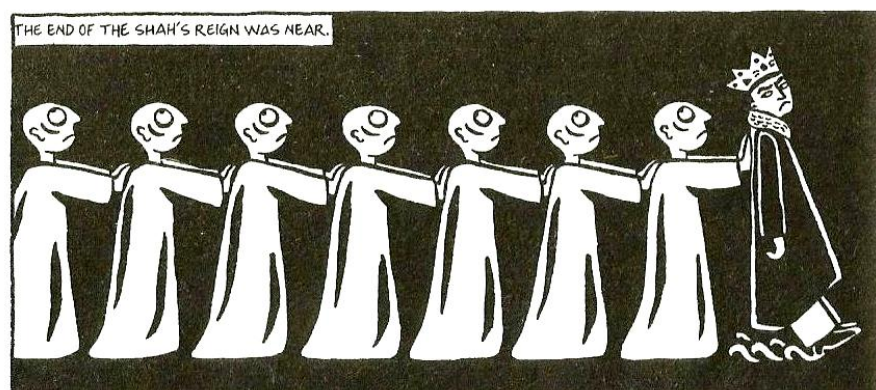
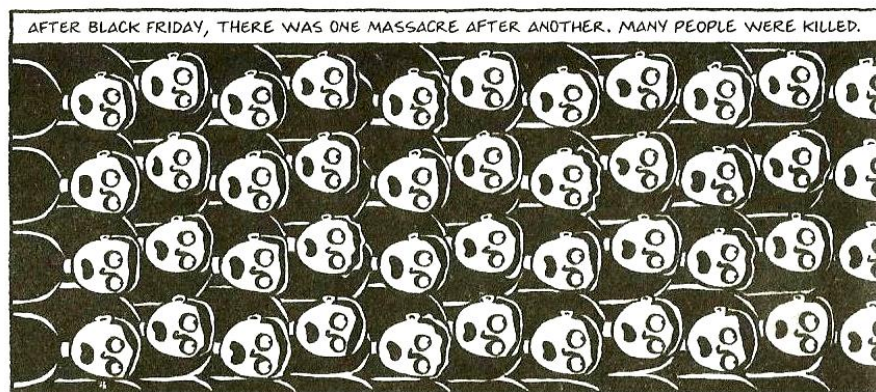


PLATE 5.4: *Persepolis*, p. 40

A 'dozen prime ministers'²²⁴ are drawn up in an orderly parade, different in shape and features, but all as motionless and straight as they have to be under the oppression of the one ruler. Even the following short panel, where the statue of the Shah is being brought down is following the same lead. The statue is drawn completely vertical, a direct line in the same geometrical restrictions. Up until his departure the army salutes the emperor as the military do.

²²⁴ Ibid. p. 41

Everything is in order, and that means a graphic order, very specific and very clear.

The following page differs: ‘The day he left, the country had the biggest celebration of its entire history’,²²⁵ (Plate 5.5). This panel occupies the entire page and it is so strikingly different. It is not the difference in the people’s faces, eyes closed in a happy smirk, mouths wide open with laughter, it is the graphic body language, arms thrown in the air, forming curves and curls, cloths in different patterns, a most colourful picture, for a novel written entirely in black and white.

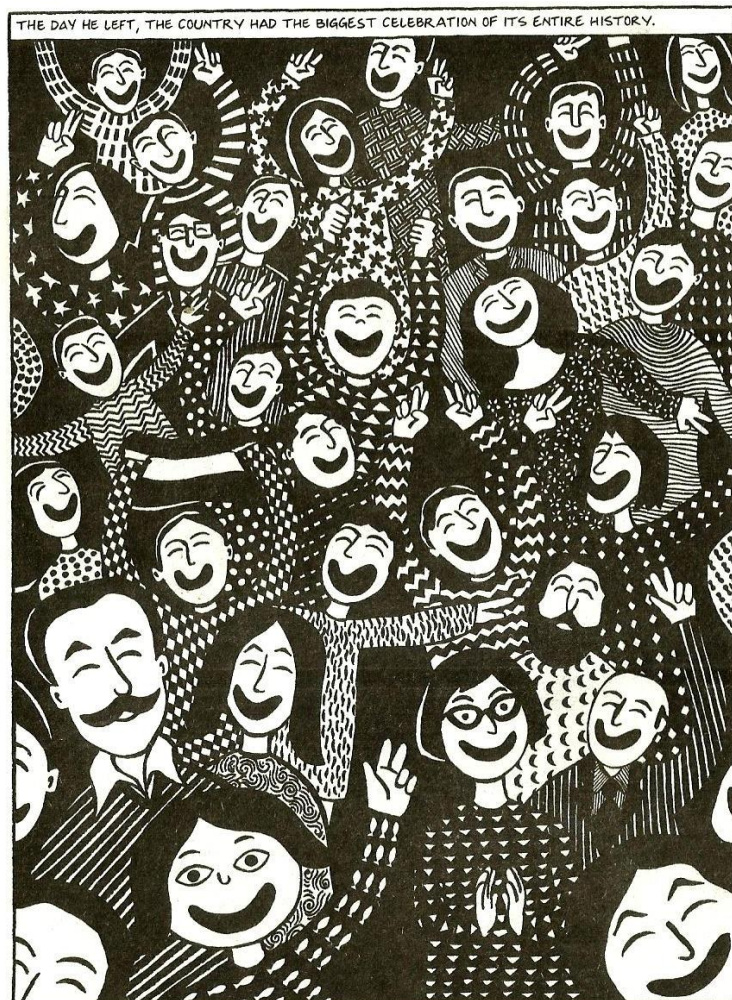


PLATE 5.5: *Persepolis*, p. 42

Every angle in this panel is less sharp, everything is obtuse, rounded, there is nothing strict and nothing forced in this last picture. The lack of graphic detail is a prominent feature of *Persepolis*, but through this purposeful crudeness of

²²⁵ Ibid. p. 42.

the design there are too many elements that come through. The nature of the drawn line indicates meaning and brings through elements of the narration in a unique way. If one was only to look at the three major panels described above (the corpse, the zombie-like creatures pushing the Shah and the party) without any context or script, they would still understand the change in the regime, a change of the status quo which occurs purely due to the difference in the composition of the geometry.

It is a matter of inception and perception, an instinctual feeling occurring due to the differentiation in the norm. What we have seen so far and accepted as the standard, changes to its complete opposite which generates a completely new emotion; it is not a logical interpretation, but much more basic and unconscious, it is a change perceived through the eye and communicated in an underground kind of way, without being necessarily analysed logically by the casual reader. What I've mentioned so far is just a crude example, very linear and simple, but it signifies a common rule which forms and shapes the function of the graphic medium. The more complex the design gets, the more details added for the eye to process, the more complex are the feelings, ideas and thoughts communicated in an unconscious level. The reader who will never analyse a panel in the formal academic way, will still have perceived most or some of the meaning running rampant on the page. As the complexity increases the liberty of the reader for interpretation increases as well. However the elements of design are always there and they allow every kind of interpretation since it is impossible to be ignored. Smith presents the poetic language as such:

The drives, as represented in the instinctual energy of the developing child, are checked by biological and social constraints. They nevertheless permeate what Kristeva calls semiotisable material, such as voice and gesture, and faced with real constraints, enter into a subjective economy which can be perceived as processes of condensation and displacement. In the literary text these processes take the form of metaphor and metonymy. They represent the way in which the pre-verbal operates synchronically across the signifying system and such

processes are particularly apparent in dream. Like dream, poetic language given that it is defined by its infringement of the laws of grammar and prose, brings together the linguistic or symbolic – *signification*, and the pre-verbal or semiotic – *sens*.²²⁶

If we add to this the increased complexity and countless creative and expressive opportunities offered by the graphic medium, we see that the drives are presented even more straightforwardly, in a more direct, a more imminent way.

Persepolis is in an open dialogue with at least two major cultures. The Western-European culture is dominant, and we never get to see the Middle East-Iranian culture unfolding in its full capacity, enlightening the reader with details or providing a further understanding. Satrapi frequently quotes facts, historical and familial anecdotes, but never delves into the Iranian culture in a significant way. The author has been in this cultural class since childhood, and *Persepolis* is bringing forward more of her westernised self, besides talking about experiences and narrations regarding Iran. She never talks about tradition or experienced culture, even in the years before she moved away from her home country. Everything she ever refers to regarding Iran, is in a semi-mocking or distanced way, like her childish conversations with God and her first experience with the use of the veil. The reason for that could be the fact that Marji, or Satrapi herself as a matter of fact, never felt like a traditional Iranian, or had to disassociate from this Iranian part of hers, and build her identity using the material offered by the western culture that seems to prevail in her own family, that was the cornerstone of her education before the revolution and that she was forced to accept when she was sent to Europe at the age of fourteen.

The experience of migration has been crucial for the way the protagonist has been seeing the world and herself, about how she understands her own identity as an Iranian. Maybe a better word for her situation would be exile, for even though she was never officially forced out of the country by political, religious or violent means, her going away was imposed on her by her

²²⁶ Anne-Marie Smith, *Julia Kristeva : Speaking the Unspeakable*, Modern European Thinkers (London ; Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 1998). pp. 20-21

parents (for fear of her life and well-being) and by the political situation in Iran. She is in essence in exile, and this has the strongest effects on how she deals with her staying in Vienna.

One of the few aspects of the Iranian life mentioned have to do with several social changes caused because of the political turbulence. There is a lot of emphasis given to the martyrs, or heroes, a term that is ambivalent and hosts many different interpretations. Early in the book, after the fall of the Shah, a family friend is released from prison. He visits the Satrapis, and discusses his experiences with them. Siamak is the father of little Laly, a child friend of Marji. Marji had never seen the father of her friend, since he had spent the last six years as a political prisoner, convicted as a Communist. The presentation of this type of a martyr is made with dark, yet glorious colours. In the same episode of the narration, two released political prisoners, friends of the family meet together and spend the night discussing their prison experience. Siamak Jari and Mohsen Shakiba describe the life in prison in full detail, including the tortures and brutality of the oppressors, without taking into account the presence of the nine year old girl:

-You remember the day they pulled out my nails? They have grown back since. Not in a normal way... But at least I have them. Our torturers received special training from the C.I.A.

-Real scientists! They knew each part of the body. They knew where to hit!

-Look! On your soles there are nerves that lead directly to the brain. They whipped me with thick electric cables so much that this looks like nothing but a foot.

-Not to mention putting out their cigarettes on our backs and thighs...²²⁷

Little Marji is a witness not of the events, but of the narrations, and these narrations are engraved to her perception of the political situation. The graphic discussion goes on and on, and soon after the graphic representation changes

²²⁷ Satrapi, *Persepolis*. pp. 50-51

too. The conversation above is presented in a round table, people discussing, people just saying what happened. The next set of narration has changed to a representative mode, where the things they say are visualised too: ‘Ahmadi... Ahmadi was assassinated. As a member of the guerrillas, he suffered hell. He always had cyanide on him in case he was arrested, but he was taken by surprise and unfortunately he never had a chance to use it... So he suffered the worst torture...’,²²⁸ (Plate 5.6).



PLATE 5.6: *Persepolis*, p. 51

In a large, marginless panel we see Ahmadi being whipped, having someone urinating over his wounds, being burned with an iron. In the vertically narrow panel to follow, Marji looks suspiciously and with disgust at the home iron: ‘I

²²⁸ Ibid. p. 51.

never imagined that you could use that appliance for torture'.²²⁹ Upon flipping the page we learn the end of Ahmadi: 'In the end he was cut to pieces',²³⁰ (Plate 5.7). The dead body of Ahmadi is therefore presented in pieces, dismembered in the joints, like a wooden puppet, gore, in its whiteness. These images are not a representation of the real events as much as they are a representation of young Marji's interpretation of the stories she listened to.

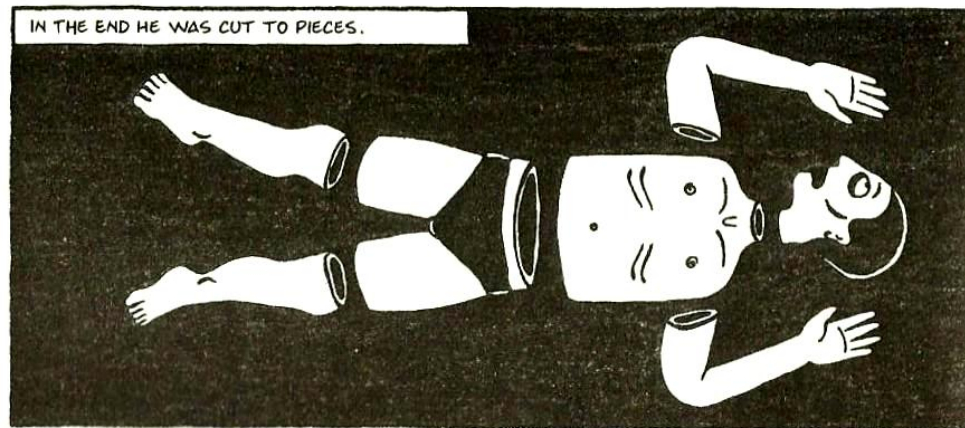


PLATE 5.7: *Persepolis*, p. 52 (detail)

As a child she witnesses a most perplexing situation, where the state is not to be trusted, the father of a dear friend has suffered unspeakable horror, her parents are so stunned they forget to 'spare her the experience'²³¹ and her pacifist mother cries out loud 'All torturers should be massacred'.²³² The child is unable to cope with all this information, and the picture she receives of the country she lives in. She is perplexed enough to start thinking about torturing torturers, the value of forgiveness and residing back to the arms of God, only temporarily, until she loses this last resort soon after. Kimberly Wedeven Segall's observation that '[t]raumatic stories pass from one generation to the next, creating a sense of collected grief'²³³ is absolutely relevant here. But it is not merely collective grief, but collective trauma as well, with all the psychological implications this carries. The history evolving around Marji is

²²⁹ Ibid. p. 51.

²³⁰ Ibid. p. 51.

²³¹ Ibid. p. 51.

²³² Ibid. p. 52.

²³³ Kimberly Wedeven Segall, "Melancholy Ties: Intergenerational Loss and Exile in *Persepolis*," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 28, no. 1 (2008). p. 40.

paving her way. Satrapi is smashing this solid construction and using the building material of her own fragmented memory is creating anew her life story through autobiography, and her own understanding of the history that defined her upbringing.

The internal alienation of the protagonist, not only during her years of exile, but upon her return to an Iran which is foreign for the heroine is another structural part of the story. Marji is sent away to Austria. She does not speak German and the western ways are a lot stranger than she had expected. She knows that her mentality does not belong to Iran, but she cannot find a safe and welcoming home in Europe either. She struggles to fit in, but can never find internal peace. She is a tangible incarnation of the “Other”, the ever foreign, which cannot fit in and cannot be comfortable in any situation. At the sensitive age of fourteen she is forced to provide for herself and survive in a cold, orderly, civilised jungle; even the climate is unfriendly and sour. Viewed as a foreign body herself, targeted for her different colour and legacy, she is feared and despised, as a stranger in this strange land. This kind of deep sorrow, the breaking apart from your own land, and going away in a place that is never home, is hard to be understood by people who have not experienced one sort of estrangement or another. Said on *Reflections on Exile* explains how charm and dread co-exist in the state of being in exile:

Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile's life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever.²³⁴

²³⁴ Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile : And Other Essays*, Convergences (Cambridge, Mass) (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 2001). p. 173.

Satrapı does not present a romanticised version of her time in Austria. She grasps (both intellectually and graphically) the essence of Said's points perfectly. Her years in Austria are dark, and are presented as such from the very beginning.

It is the November of 1984, when the second volume of *Persepolis*, finds Marji in Austria, sent away by her parents for her own protection against her teenage impulses, the consequences of which could prove fatal if she was to stay in her home country. She is entrusted to the hands of her mother's best friend Zozo, who lives with her family in Vienna and is supposed to look after the girl, but not everything goes according to plan. The first page of the second volume starts with a disappointment: 'I had come here with the idea of leaving a religious Iran for an open and secular Europe and that Zozo, my mother's best friend, would love me like her own daughter. Only here I am! She left me at a boarding house run by nuns'.²³⁵ This first disappointment is not the first negative aspect of Marji's exile. The experience is deemed unpleasant before it has even started, at the Tehran Airport where Marji is being seen off by her parents, at the end of the first volume. Her mother and father are trying to encourage her and restrain themselves from breaking down:

Mother: You'll see, everything will be ok. Don't cry.

Think of your future. Europe awaits you.

Father: As soon as you get to Vienna, go and eat a sachertorte. It's the most delicious chocolate cake.

Mother: And in six months we'll come see you. No tears, you're a big girl.

Father: You've got to go now. Don't forget who you are and where you come from.

Marji: I love you!²³⁶

The emotional burden of being separated by her parents is getting heavier with every step she takes away from them. As Marji goes past the customs control the narrator (who is always a version of herself coming from a later point in time, a fact as important as any narratological element of the book) tells us: 'I

²³⁵ Satrapı, *Persepolis*. p. 157.

²³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 152.

couldn't bear looking at them there behind the glass. Nothing's worse than saying goodbye. It's a little like dying'.²³⁷ The separation is getting harder and harder as her departure becomes more eminent and thus more final. When she turns back one last time to wave goodbye she sees her father walking away carrying her mother who fainted due to the emotional strain. This is not part of the textual narration. It is only represented graphically and the sole comment on it is this: 'It would have been better to just go',²³⁸ just go away without looking back (Plate 5.8).



PLATE 5.8: *Persepolis*, p. 153

The last panel occupies the two thirds of the page and is based on clear lines and a horizontal axon. The design is unadorned, almost severe, and unlike the general style of the novel it has a sense of perspective. There are two levels, one where Marji is looking at the back of her father, trapped behind a glass wall, and another where the father faces the reader on a close up while carrying

²³⁷ Ibid. p. 153.

²³⁸ Ibid.

his unconscious wife away. These two figures are much larger as a result of being closer to the page and Marji is lost, a tiny child in the depths of the panel. ‘It would have been better just to go’, she says, and the reader can see clearly what is that the heroine should have better not seen. There is a diagonal axis connecting Marji with the joint figure of her parents, and this connection that is just about to break indicates the forcefulness of this separation, of this departure. This is the last image of her family that she will carry with her to the foreign land, this and the advice her grandmother gave her the previous night: ‘In life you’ll meet a lot of jerks. If they hurt you, tell yourself that it’s because they are stupid. That will help keep you from reacting to their cruelty. Because there is nothing worse than bitterness and vengeance... Always keep your dignity and be true to yourself’.²³⁹ This piece of advice will later return to haunt her, when she stumbles upon her fragmented identity, when the conflict between cultures grows too big for her to handle.

Soon after her arrival in Vienna her mother’s friend decides that there is not enough space for Marji in her household, and so she will have to be sent away to a catholic boarding house. Along with the social, geographical and linguistic differences, Marji will also have to deal with a religious environment hostile to her foreignness –even though surprisingly enough there is no direct religious conflict described in the book despite her Islamic origins. She has to get used to a radically new way of life, not only because she is in another continent, but mostly because she is in another country all by herself. There is no smooth transition between her protected childhood and a wild, unsupervised adolescence where she is free but also pinned down to obligations that she carries with her even though nobody is there to impose them on her. In Vienna she does not only experience the “Other”, she is the “Other”, an elusive non-being that we are not sure where it is coming from, or exactly what it is, but we know for sure that it makes us feel uncomfortable and gives us no way of dealing with it since it cannot be touched for various reasons –most often because it cannot be located exactly, on other occasions because the “Other” is considered to be filthy, unclean, contaminated and unhygienic to touch.

Being treated as such is already bad enough, when for certain reasons you are overcome by the feeling that you are actually this unclean, potentially

²³⁹ Ibid. p. 150.

harmful “Other” the result is grave. The individual cannot deal with the psychic tension created due to the internal battle, and this energy is used in many different ways, not all of which are positive. Smith notes that:

All imaginative practice, such as art, poetry, love and psychoanalysis represents the individual subject’s encounter with the law of the father, of the symbolic and of society, with imposed form and structure, as well as representing the imaginative attempts to battle with this frame of reference in the name of desire, subjectivity and the energy and drives they bring into play.²⁴⁰

In these occasions the tension has managed to find a creative way out and the force it carries has not been destructive as it potentially could. But this will rarely if ever happen on the spot and straightaway. It is always more possible that the person will have to suffer the consequences of this tension, and later return to these events and construct their artistic apparatus by memory. Simonetta Falasca Zamponi writes about this backfiring memory: ‘In the novel on the other hand, memory is not supported by familiar continuity; it is artificially made. The question or the past becomes displaced and problematized, and time is separated from meaning. Memory is now supposed to create a meaning of the past’.²⁴¹ Every autobiography is indeed an act of remembering, a process where meaning is created by narrating the past, that is reshaping the past to fit the narration.

Anne-Marie Smith has composed an interesting semi-biographical monograph on Julia Kristeva’s foreignness which is very similar to the one Satrapi presents in *Persepolis*:

She [Kristeva] has adopted a country which despite its symbolic recognition of her work [...] could never adopt her foreignness; France is a profoundly ethnocentric, phallogocentric country, and foreignness, dissidence and

²⁴⁰ Smith, *Julia Kristeva : Speaking the Unspeakable*. pp. 17-18.

²⁴¹ Simonetta Falasca Zamponi, *Of Storytellers and Master Narratives: Modernity, Memory, and History in Fascist Italy* in J. Olick and Jeffrey K. Olick, *States of Memory : Continuities, Conflicts, and Transformations in National Retrospection* (Durham [N.C.] ; London: Duke University Press, 2003). p. 44.

femininity are integral factors in Julia Kristeva's construction of her intellectual identity. [...]. The French language is the place from which she speaks and to which she returns, yet it is not her native language and Kristeva does not identify with the French intellectual tradition *per se*. She has always insisted upon the need for identity to be at once non-fixed and yet guaranteed, the need for dissidence and transgression to be contained within a structure. In this light, her own identification with the French language as the place from which she speaks and experiences what she speaks can be seen as a necessary structure for her interrogation of the vigil codes and practices which characterise the grammar of that language and inform the French intellectual tradition.²⁴²

The language is becoming a crucial factor in the logic of foreignness, and Satrapi operates in more than two languages. She flies to Europe speaking, besides her native tongue, excellent French, but she is sent to a country where the official language is German. She experiences exile in German, but she writes her autobiography in French again, but mostly in comics, which is a different, more intimate and rewarding language, more inclusive and comprehending. As for Smith, French is Kristeva's "adopted language" which 'professes an energetic and exclusive attachment to [...] as the place where she constructs her meaning',²⁴³ so for Satrapi comics is her adopted language through which she constructs not only a meaning but an identity.

Marji's return from Austria to Iran four years later puts her in the opposite position. She is now even more of a stranger, for she is carrying the norms and values of a different world, and she is even more unforgivable, for she seems to have betrayed her own values and culture. Just like Kristeva, '[i]n adopting the West, she entered into a scenario of abandonment, abandonment of one's native country, abandonment by one's native country, and little ground for reconciliation, for visits home, until the fall of the Berlin Wall in

²⁴² Smith, *Julia Kristeva : Speaking the Unspeakable*. pp. 2-3.

²⁴³ *Ibid.* p. 7.

1989'.²⁴⁴ These are all very strong building materials, when discussing the construction of identity and the formation of the idea of the self.

Persepolis demonstrates all of these elements in their extremity, underlined in the narration by the imposing, personal graphic style of the author, pronounced and piercing, offering many an opportunity for criticism and interpretation. But what is the deepest, more significant consequence of being so foreign, and remaining foreign even after you are back in a place you are supposed to call home? We need to keep in mind the fact the Marji, and indeed Satrapi, left Iran permanently six years after her return, this time for France where she is writing this document of exile from. Marji's story ends at the airport, on her way to Paris, and we have no data about her experience in France. Smith however writes on her own study:

Kristeva permanently reiterates a sense of feeling foreign in France which is not unlike the sense of being a woman in the male order of things, of belonging and yet not quite fitting. Being a dissident, being foreign, being female is what had enabled her to imagine and occupy that interrogative and exorbitant position which characterises her thought, to be at once outside and inside, to be seen as the quintessence of Frenchness abroad while feeling perfectly foreign at home, to be always in exile. And this state of exile, which is also a possibility for exorbitance, is one she has always related to being a woman.²⁴⁵

Satrapi is painfully female as well as foreign, as Kristeva is and under more harsh circumstances. She is leaving, going back to and escaping again from a regime that targets her being a woman even more than being liberal and independent. Her story of permanent exile starts with the first denial of her womanhood, the fist insult, the day she is forced to cover herself, succumbing to the demand that a woman is something that needs to be restrained in every possible way. Naghibi and O'Malley have argued, that 'diasporic Iranian women writers have recently been using the genre to challenge the stereotype

²⁴⁴ Ibid. p. 77.

²⁴⁵ Ibid. p. 78.

of self-effacing, modest Iranian woman and to write themselves back into the history of the nation. Where *Persepolis* differs from these other Iranian diasporic autobiographies is in its use of a child narrator and of another Western form, the comic book'.²⁴⁶ In her own way and using a different expressive medium, Satrapi is trying to reinvent herself, relocate her into the history of her country both as an Iranian and as a woman.

²⁴⁶ Naghibi and O'Malley, "Estranging the Familiar: "East" And "West" In Satrapi's *Persepolis* 1." p. 224.

CHAPTER SIX

Fun Home: Familial and Internal Conflict

In a 2009 interview to Rebecca Savastio, at the MiND studios, Alison Bechdel explains, or rather exposes, the creative process and analyses the technical and artistic tools she used in order to compose each one of her *Fun Home* panels.²⁴⁷ This peek into the labours of the artist is illustrating how the comics medium works under the surface and past the impression of the final product; how many layers of operation are hidden behind the published page that presents the finished comics panel. Of course the creative process differs for every artist, but the general rule (or process) of brainstorming, researching, drafting and printing is a standard procedure for comics production.

Even though *Fun Home* is a memoir, based on Bechdel's difficult childhood and complicated adult life and remembrances, it does not escape the above mentioned rule about the artistic process, which does not have to apply solely to fiction. Remembering an incident and wanting to include it in the story-line does not save you the research and the drafting, nor the brainstorming, particularly if the incident in question has taken place in the early years of the author's childhood. When talking about life-writing, we do not only refer to the events and circumstances that the narrator must recall; the author must also review the feelings and later interpretations that can distort the clarity of the memory, they have to work through the confusion and conflict that creates incompatible memories which must be presented as coherent enough to fit the narration and provide a convincing storytelling. This is so generally agreed upon as to be included in the entry about "autobiography" in a dictionary of literary terms as a standard definition: 'Memory can be unreliable. Few can recall clear details of their early life and most are therefore dependent on other people's impressions, of necessity equally unreliable. Moreover, everyone tends to remember what he or she wants to remember. Disagreeable facts are sometimes glossed over or repressed, truth may be

²⁴⁷ MiNDTV35, "Alison Bechdel - Creating "Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic" " (2009)., <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cumLU3UpcGY>

distorted for the sake of convenience or harmony and the occlusions of time may obscure as much as they reveal'.²⁴⁸

This is a notion very much in sync with the givens of psychoanalysis. Freud has suggested that '[i]t is perhaps altogether questionable whether we have any conscious memories *from* childhood: perhaps we have only memories *of* childhood'.²⁴⁹ In discussing the ideas of screen memories, memories that appear to come from early childhood, but their clarity cannot be justified by their apparent importance, raising doubts about their authenticity. According to Freud: 'it is not that they have been freely invented; they are incorrect in so far as they transfer an event to a place where it did not happen [...], merge two people into one, substitute one person for another, or reveal themselves as combinations of two discrete experiences', but this elaboration appears to be 'of a tendentious nature; that is to say, they serve to repress and replace objectionable or disagreeable impressions'.²⁵⁰ The writing of autobiography is a constant strain to overcome the obstacles that have been posed by the self, by time and others. It demands a thorough search within the self and recourse to any independent documentation available.

The most painstaking process is the evaluation of each memory, the understanding of the consequences this memory (or the incident producing it) has had for the person during their lives, a process that can be as difficult as it is painful, since the analysis of each precious childhood memory is bound to reveal a concealed secret, ranging from an unpleasant realisation to significant trauma. Particularly in the composition of a consistent *family romance*²⁵¹ imagination works hand in hand with memory to confuse, and conceal the future autobiographer. The unearthing of the deepest roots of childhood memories is part of the construction of the personal narrative that defines each person, which is prerequisite for the composition of an autobiography and it needs skill and precision.

²⁴⁸ J. A. Cuddon and Claire Preston, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998). p. 63.

²⁴⁹ Freud and Phillips, *The Penguin Freud Reader*. p. 559.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁵¹ The title of a 1909 paper by Freud, referring to the management of child-parental relations, which is as a term very appropriately associated with the composition of an autobiography. *Ibid.* pp. 442-426.

In the video of her interview, Bechdel describes her method thoroughly:²⁵² at first she writes down the dialogue and narration panels, making a 'storyboard' as this is going to appear in the final sketch, keeping notes of what she is planning to draw in the margins. She then goes ahead to research anything that has to do with the details which will illustrate the panel. The details in the environment, the surrounding and people's clothing are not going to be elaborate, but the cartoonist needs to have an informed sense of how the clothes of the time were, the landscape and architecture of this particular place was at the particular time she writes about. She points out how Google and family photographs are a great source of information about the trends of the time, and the visual feeling of the period. Bechdel then takes pictures of herself in the postures of all the people appearing in the panel, so that she can have a clear view of the exact bodily stance of the person, even if this is a secondary character or just a spectator. This helps to make her drawing more vivid, more grounded to the human physique, more convincing even.

After the research stage, the cartoonist draws rough sketches, one after another, adding a little more detail every time until the illustration is ready to be scanned into Photoshop and then processed into digital form. A rough draft of the panel is ready and after this she needs to make a new layer of drawing, scan this too into the program and combine the two pictures, thus creating the final illustration. She adds the words in the reserved space, adds the colour and the panel is ready. Watching the interview with the additional audiovisual material is useful because it gives a clear and flowing picture of how the panel is constructed in real time –moving time; one can see the drafts getting more and more elaborate, the processing on the computer, and particularly the combination of the two layers which give the final result.

This process is of course due to an artistic necessity, it is however reminiscent of the way the unconscious covers up in layers every memory, even feelings, blanking out certain details, pointing others out more, cloaking everything in a film of fog, giving it a special colour, depending maybe on the dominant smell, or taste, or music of the time, and presenting it as material for analysis, which now we need to uncover and denude in order to reach the raw – or as raw as it can get– material and resolve the psychoanalytic conflict. Maybe

²⁵² MiNDTV35, "A Conversation with Alison Bechdel," (2009).
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pvF46ehiHfc&feature=relmfu>

the fact that as a project of art it is exposing the artist to the wider audience and in a more uncontrollable way accentuates the defence mechanisms making the repressions, replacements and distortions even more artful, meaning even harder to uncover. In the particular context of autobiographical material, which is not only her personal memories, and her personal story, but family secrets and a shame that had been hidden for decades, Bechdel's method is using a circular logic by uncovering the memory, processing it, putting it on paper and covering it up again.

Into this one and only panel, which is not hugely important for the narration, merely a depiction of a nightly view of fireworks over a New York roof, filled with people and skyscrapers in the background, Bechdel had invested not only her memory of the fact and interpretation of it, but also a whole lot of information about the time and about her surroundings and, almost in an emblematic way, bits of her present self; she involves this present self in the depiction process not only by drawing the sketches, but also by posing herself and getting pictures of herself pretending to be the other people in the panel. She becomes bodily, her own brother, her father and the gay man who inspired her from across the roof. The material is dense and well concealed into the apparent simplicity of the panel. The memory has served a psychoanalytic purpose: it has come to light, has been given substance and meaning, has revealed itself in the service of understanding and has been camouflaged for the reader to do their own unveiling.

The unconscious speaks a private language, and the assumption that this is universal cannot be firmly established. However, if we accept that the mechanisms of concealing, repressing and distorting are a common strategy, widely accepted by psychoanalysis, I would suggest that the exposed unconscious of the author can trigger a response in the unconscious of the reader. This dual communication is accepted in psychoanalysis in the form of transferences and countertransferences that occur during the analysis between a patient and their therapist. The therapist must be aware of this fact in order to avoid tricky traps set by their own unconscious, and they have been trained to be so. The reader on the other hand cannot be as vigilant, at least not on all occasions and at all times. The reader is investing the story with their own material and personal information, memories and feelings, and this is true for all narrative mediums, but comics offer a lot more space for these

countertransferences to take place. For this reason any reader could potentially read a number of different interpretations into the panel, give emphasis into different aspects and colour the picture in somewhat more personal colours depending on their personal story.

This practice of getting into other peoples shoes (even the old, worn-out shoes of one's own self) has been underlined by Art Spiegelman in *MetaMaus* as well:

[I]n making this kind of work, one has to inhabit and identify with each character. You have to act out their poses, you have to think them through. So, in that sense, even though I am very resistant to the notion of my work being dismissed or understood as a therapeutic exercise, it is true that there is a kind of gestalting necessary just to be able to inhabit each character.²⁵³

Spiegelman's admission gives a routed psychological meaning to the practice of understanding the characters someone is writing about. It is not only an artistic process, it is an evaluating process, during which the artist struggles for comprehension. In order to be able to present their work to their audience they need to have thoroughly examined the tiniest details, and understood (or convince themselves that they have understood) deeply their objects –even if the object in question is their own self. The use of the body stance of the characters is in fact a method of acting out the memory (or narration in the case of Spiegelman) in attempt to re-experience and thus re-evaluate or come to a conclusion regarding this particular event. Since the body is involved, the body remembers, and brings out more thoughts and feelings, like when memory is triggered by odour.

²⁵³ Spiegelman, *Metamaus : Art Spiegelman Looks inside His Modern Classic, Maus*. p. 35.

Alison Bechdel's father died on the 3rd of July 1980 after being hit by a truck when she was twenty years old. This is the beginning of the second chapter of *Fun Home*, opening with a newspaper cover as its first panel.

The first, brief, chapter serves as an introduction to the mentality and character of the father, Bechdel's father had his moments as a caring parent, but is presented mostly as distant, reserved, bizarre and frequently obsessed – mainly with decor, literature, gardening and cleaning. His angry outbursts used to scare and upset the family, and much of his behaviour was incomprehensible for Alison during her childhood and adolescence. The title page of this first chapter features a rough sketch of Bruce Bechdel which could have been copied from an old photograph. He is posing with a sensual, voluptuous expression on his face, with heavy eyelids, sensuous lips, rich hair and his arms comfortably seated at his hips. It is unclear whether he is bare-chested or he is wearing a top, but the feeling one gets from this first picture is different to how the father is presented later in the story, both physically and mentally. Its importance is only understood later however, even though the first-time reader would probably move on from the title page of the first panel, the impression that this picture makes stays somewhere in the back of one's head, and will come back to click the puzzle, and will be explained. This is an interesting function of narrative mediums, and the comics medium in particular, when a piece of information has been planted with the reader as a simple visual statement, without much fuss, without making itself noticeable, and it stays with the reader until it can fall into place later in action.

The title itself of the chapter, ('Old father, old artificer',²⁵⁴ Plate 6.1) introduces another aspect of the father's character. This direct reference to James Joyce and his last page of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is only the first of many literary references into the text, that create a link between the narrating daughter and her father, as literature has been one of his distinctive passions, and has shaped their relationship as a common ground, a meeting point between the two. By making a portrait of her father as someone alive, a man permanently young, she pays homage to the one aspect of him that got to bond them together as father and daughter.

²⁵⁴ Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home : A Family Tragicomic* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2006). p. 1.

CHAPTER 1



OLD FATHER, OLD ARTIFICER

PLATE 6.1: *Fun Home*, p. 1

The older Bechdel, who is the narrator of the story, is no less perplexed than young Alison regarding her father; even though she has come to know what his secret was. Part of this confusion can be found in her dealing with his sudden death:

There's no proof, actually, that my father killed himself. No one knew it wasn't an accident. His death was quite possibly his consummate artifice, his masterstroke. There's no proof, but there are some suggestive circumstances. The fact that my mother had asked him for a divorce two weeks before. The copy of Camus' *A Happy Death* that he's been reading and leaving around the house in what might be constructed as a deliberate manner.²⁵⁵ (Plate 6.2).

²⁵⁵ Ibid. p. 27.



PLATE 6.2: *Fun Home*, p. 27

Alison calls his alleged suicide an “artifice”, and has resorted earlier to an old quote from Joyce to call her father an ‘artificer’, and this is interesting as a choice. The literary context is most probably an homage to her father’s fascination with classical literature, but the word itself carries its own significance, which is underlined by the fact that she chooses to use it again further in her text. The standard definition is this of ‘a person who makes things by art or skill; an artisan, a craftsman’,²⁵⁶ but it also has the now rare meaning (as in the OED) of ‘an artful, cunning, or devious person; a trickster, a

²⁵⁶ Oxford English Dictionary, “Artificer, N.” (Oxford University Press).

dissembler'.²⁵⁷ The ambiguity with which she is dealing with her father's death suggests her ambiguous feelings. She feels cheated. This is not surprising. She has been building an idea of the father for most of her life, and suddenly she finds out that her father had been hiding a different personality, a different personal story. Before she has a chance to come to terms with this, her father is already gone. The final impression she keeps is his having deviously tricked her into ignorance, and her thoughts about his alleged suicide only reinforce this feeling.

Never in the book –or elsewhere– is there any evidence that Bruce Allen Bechdel committed suicide; but this idea certainly dominates the narration, which is focused on the problematic relationship of Alison with her father. The book works as a substitute or complement of psychotherapy and it is an explicit attempt by the author to comprehend her past in a psychoanalytic manner, by exposing it, talking through it, stirring it and unravelling its dirty secrets. Alison insists that her father committed suicide, and seems to wish that this is the truth atrocious though it may be. The father in this story has been distant and difficult to please. The child Alison never tries to hold his attention (in fact her narration seems like an attempt to desperately deny that she even tried) but adult Alison writes an entire book about him as she struggles to put her life back together after the shattering blow of her father's death.

The book's title is *Fun Home*, a reference to the family business of a Funeral Home but also of the family home, the big, polished, heavily decorated mansion that was the father's obsession and pride. Besides the wordplay, the content of the book is everything but "funny", which makes the choice of title an intriguing aspect of the analysis. Freud spoke extensively about jokes and the Unconscious in his 1905 book *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*. In 1928 he comes back to the subject with a brief journal paper on *Humour* where he argues that the use of humour can be a defence mechanism 'against the possibility of suffering',²⁵⁸ which makes the humorist adopt a self-asserted attitude putting them in the position of the parent against the recipient of the joke, who is treated as a child, implausible as it may sound, Freud argues, at the same time as the humorists treat themselves as children,

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ Freud and Phillips, *The Penguin Freud Reader*. p. 563.

with this uplifting, playful behaviour.²⁵⁹ Freud finds the roots of this complex schema in the structure of the psyche, and the conflict between the Ego and the superego: ‘The superego is genetically the heir to the parental agency, it often holds the ego in strict dependence, and really continues to treat it as in early childhood the parents –or the father– treated the child’.²⁶⁰ Freud clearly sees the attempt for humour as a response to an internal conflict, or a soothing way out of it. The actual traumatic content of *Fun Home* could suggest that the title has been used in a sarcastic tone, but even this is a defence mechanism against pain and frustration.

The focus of the book is primarily on the father and not about family life in general. However, many of its dark points get to be clarified and seen through a different prism, as *Fun Home* comes with an addendum, which also gives it more weight as an analytical project. Six years after the publication of *Fun Home: A Tragicomic*, Bechdel publishes her second memoir, *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama*, which refers to a later point in her life, the period during the composition and after the publication of her first book, providing us with useful insight upon her writing process. *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama* is as much a psychoanalytic novel as it is a memoir, since Bechdel is presenting this period through her analytic sessions and her dwelling in psychoanalytic literature. If *Fun House* is being distinctively engaged with literature and literary theory, using it to light up the familial connections and particularly the mentality of the father, *Are You My Mother* is almost entirely focused on psychoanalysis.

By using the comparative information rendered by the second book, we can justify a series of claims that have been made throughout this thesis about the relationship between comics and psychoanalysis. The association of the medium with psychoanalysis and the creative process comes effortlessly by association in the second book, giving evidence for further realisations regarding the functionality of the medium. *Are You My Mother?*, besides mentioning the mother straight away and eagerly in the title has very little to do with her, certainly less than one would expect from a book entitled in honour of her. Unlike *Fun Home*, which is entirely devoted to the father, *Are You My Mother?* is devoted to Alison herself. Her mother is not presented in the most

²⁵⁹ Ibid. pp. 563-564.

²⁶⁰ Ibid. p. 564.

flattering way, and a lot of Alison's issues are directly ascribed to her relationship with her mother. This mother is a distant figure, a voice on the phone who mostly objects, rejects and criticises. She is the voice of the superego, which is in essence the voice of the mother, in a vicious circle that the author is trying to break by channelling her frustration into the book.

The persona of the father is recurring. Even though the second book is about events that took place long after his death, and even though it does not flashback extensively to the period when he was still alive, it is often and long referring to the turmoil his death has caused and to the distress the book about him has caused to his wife and daughter. Not irrelevant to the above, sexuality is a question raised often and far in both books, and it is related to the death –or suicide– of the father and the relationship between Alison and her parents. Alison comes out to her family as a lesbian four months before the accident takes place. Her news were not received warmly, but it was paid back by some equally shocking news: her mother revealed to her that her father had been having affairs with other men throughout his life and during their marriage. 'I'd been upstaged, demoted from protagonist to my own drama to comic relief to my parents' tragedy. I had imagined my confession as an emancipation from my parents, but instead I was pulled back into their orbit'.²⁶¹ The revelations come from Alison's mother, maybe as a way to finally unleash and take it out in the open, maybe as a revenge for her daughter's intention to shock them into shaking herself 'out of their orbit'. When Alison asks her mother why she is the one telling her the news, and not the father, her response is: 'Your father tell the truth? Please',²⁶² thus establishing the notion of the "artificer", the cunning, devious person who befools and defrauds people around him by never telling them the truth, by constructing an elaborate lie and hiding within it.

The announcement does not comfort Alison, and the death of her father which follows soon seems like too big a coincidence to really be accepted as one. Alison decides upon the hypothesis of the suicide and will stick to it for the time to come. The confused and complex relations in the family have started long before Alison was born, but they keep affecting her way past her forties (when she writes and publishes her second novel). The love and distant relationship with her parents is part of an unusual and complicated Oedipus

²⁶¹ Bechdel, *Fun Home : A Family Tragicomic*. pp. 58-59.

²⁶² *Ibid.* p. 59.

complex which revolves around the father and has set Alison to compete for the love of the father like a son would claim maternal affection. In *Fun Home* the mother is almost absent, seemingly indifferent and nonchalant, she does not seem to constitute a considerable rival for the father's love. The father on the other hand is often distant and cold, unapproachable and unresponsive, forcing his daughter to double her efforts to win his love. The intensity and ambiguity of this complex is fully demonstrated when the daughter develops the concealed desire to have killed the father, by insisting that his death is a suicide and correlating this presumptive suicide to her coming out, even though his reaction to her news was infinitely composed and conversational.

When the subject of the father's death occurs in *Are You My Mother?*, it comes via an unexpected path. Alison is narrating her mother's childhood, the difficult years in blitz-stricken England, and her mother's dream to become an actress, which never came true. Alison's narration, mixed with quotations from Winnicott, unfolds in two levels: the plot develops on the visual level, while interrupted by written quotes from Winnicott. At one point we see the mother as a child of ten or twelve pretending to tear apart a necklace she was wearing, like she had recently seen an actress in a movie do. By accident the necklace actually breaks. The timeline moves back and forth, and when teenage Alison (judging her age from the drawing) asks her mother why she did not become an actress, the mother responds: 'Oh, I wanted to get married and have kids'.²⁶³ In a rectangular 'voice over' panel, Alison the narrator remarks: 'As a child, when I heard the story of mom accidentally breaking her treasured necklace, how I wished that I could fix it. Or better yet, go back in time and warn her'.²⁶⁴ The desire to warn and protect (even heal) her mother is projected onto the story of the necklace; what she would really want to do is to be able to warn her mother that her life choices, including the choice of spouse (maybe more than anything else the choice of spouse) were going to be traumatic with lasting effects.

²⁶³ Alison Bechdel, *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2012). p. 94.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

A page down Alison reaches the point in the timeline of the narration where she has been born: ‘One of the reasons why the mother might fail to meet the infant’s spontaneous gesture, Winnicott writes, is because the father is not performing his part well enough’.²⁶⁵ Alison’s interpretation is on the side, Winnicott’s actual quote on top, and below we see a drawing of her mother holding the baby in her arms, while her father bursts in the room exclaiming: ‘Can’t you keep that brat quiet?’,²⁶⁶ (Plate 6.3). This complex visual and narrative structure takes up one third of the page, but it communicates useful messages. Alison admits almost openly that her mother has not been a “good enough mother”; that she failed as a new mother to respond to the needs of the baby, and this failure has been following her ever since. She gives a reason for it, which is the behaviour of the father, but it is quite an admission nonetheless. She admits as well that she has always felt protective towards her mother (when it was supposed to be the other way round). And at the same time she is also presenting an image of the father that nobody could claim is flattering.

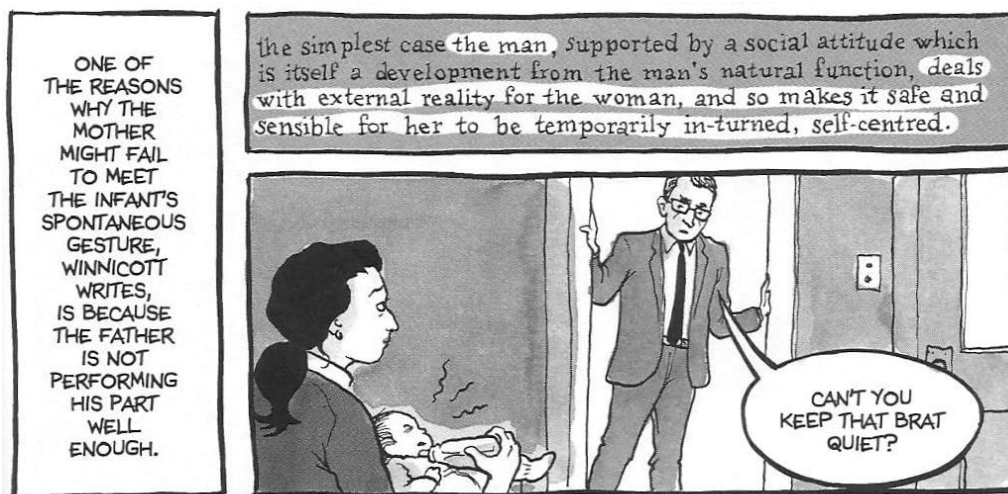


PLATE 6.3: *Are You My Mother?*, p. 95 (detail)

On the next page, face-in we see her father in his coffin; the viewing angle is from the ceiling down. Again, Alison’s narration and Winnicott’s quotes intertwine, one interrupting the other, one can almost hear the voice-over in their heads: staccato, breathless, abrupt. There is an auditory rhythm in

²⁶⁵ Ibid. p. 95.

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

what she does, even if it is in a visual form. Winnicott's quote reads: 'More towards health: The False Self has as its main concern a search for conditions which will make it possible for the True Self to come into its own. If conditions cannot be found then', the quote stops abruptly and the narrator interferes 'but if those conditions can't be found, the "clinical result is suicide"',²⁶⁷ (Plate 6.4).

It seems that the long discussion about her mother's childhood was serving the purpose of repeating her conviction that her father committed suicide. On the next panel (also from a ceiling angle) Alison is with her therapist. 'Do you ever feel angry at your father for committing suicide?', the therapist asks. 'Um... no. I don't think so',²⁶⁸ is the answer. And then she drops the subject completely.

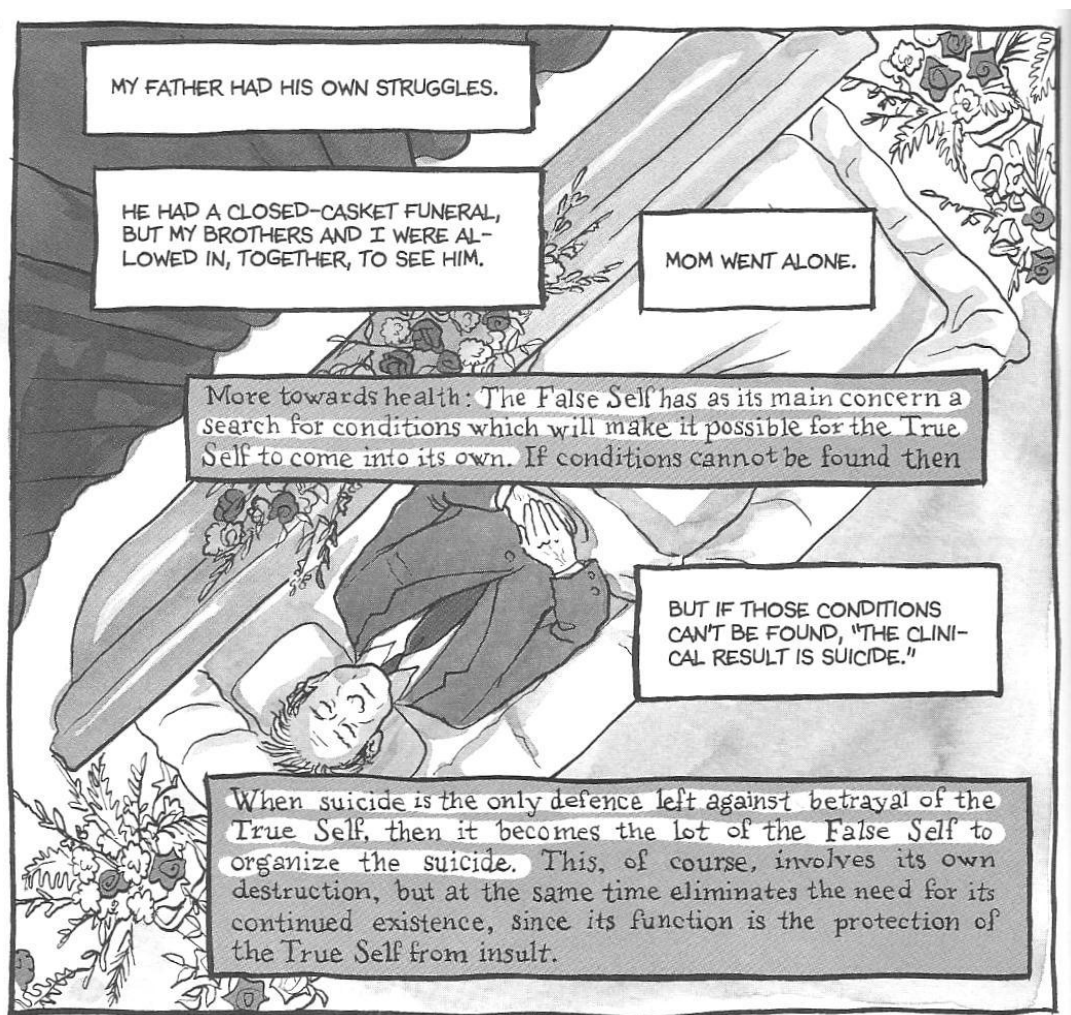


PLATE 6.4: *Are You My Mother?*, p. 96 (detail)

²⁶⁷ Ibid. p. 96.

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

One crucial element of the story stays in the background, and even though it is the title-giving factor in *Fun Home* it is neglected and almost forgotten by the end of the narration. The Bechdel family, besides their peculiarities, secrets and whimsical attributes, besides their artistic tendencies and literature interests are also the owners of the local funeral home. This funeral parlour, founded by Alison's great-grandfather, Edgar T. Bechdel in Lock Haven, Pennsylvania has been the reason why her cosmopolitan parents were forced to return from Europe after her paternal grandfather suffered a heart attack. Putting a halt to their lives, burying their future in a metaphorical way, the Bechdels returned to a small and uninspired corner of the USA and raised their family among dead people and dead dreams.

The news of the grandfather's heart attack is delivered by a man in uniform while the Bechdels enjoy a relaxing moment. Helen –the mother– is visibly pregnant with Alison and Bruce is sunbathing and reading *The Tin Drum* lying down on a deck chair. The next long panel presents a dark picture of the two senior Bechdels behind the first auto hearse in 1922. In the next page the family is already back in Pennsylvania and past and present (still past from a narrative point of view) are blended on the page creating a synthesis:

The change in plans was a cruel blow. I was born soon after they got back. For a short time we all lived with my grandmother and ailing grandfather at the funeral home. Less than a year later, we moved to a rented federal-style farmhouse and my brother Christian was born. Dad started teaching high school English. Funeral directing provided only a part-time income in our thinly populated region. By the time we moved to the gothic revival house and John was born, Europe had disappeared from my parents' horizon.²⁶⁹

The decision to return to the USA and take on the family business shaped the future of the family.

²⁶⁹ Bechdel, *Fun Home : A Family Tragicomic*. pp. 33-34.

The business itself is unusual and undoubtedly grave and influential for young children. A number of panels present us with the peculiarities of growing up in such proximity to death. The children lie down on the grass in front of a tombstone pretending to be dead as a joke. Alison curiously asks whether she can jump into an open grave. All three siblings do chores and play in the parlour with the chair trolley, the nesting flower stands, the smelling salts and everything else one can find in a funeral home.

[The crushable capsules filled with smelling salts] were for reviving people when they fainted from shock or grief, which disappointingly never seemed to happen. When a new shipment of caskets came in, we'd lift them with a winch to the showroom on the second floor of the garage. Though there were never any dead people in the showroom, it had the otherworldly ambience of a mausoleum. It was usually after school, in a melancholy, fading light, that we found ourselves up there unwrapping caskets. A rich scent of cedar hung in the air. More velvet drapes muffled any sounds from outside and heightened the sensation that time was at a standstill. Like a medium channelling lost souls, the filament of a space heater vibrated tunelessly to our footfalls. It wasn't the sort of place you wanted to be alone in.²⁷⁰

Yet this is the place where the three children of the family grow up, build their characters and develop their mentalities in spite of and because of the grimness of their surroundings.

The mother is probably aware of the damage being done –or she is aware of the opportunity she has been deprived of for having to reside to this small town: 'Don't you kids get any ideas about dragging a trailer into the backyard. After you graduate from high school, I don't want to see you again'.²⁷¹ This is not rejection, it is quite the contrary, a mother who does not want to see her children repeating her own mistakes. The presentation of the

²⁷⁰ Ibid. pp. 37-39.

²⁷¹ Ibid. p. 31.

funeral home continues in the same chapter quite analytically. Despite some random and rare comments here and there it is not described as a horrible place. It is a familiar, intimate place. Death is somewhere in the background, ever present but not openly presented:

Dad worked back in the inner sanctum, the embalming room. This smelled of bactericidal soap and embalming fluid. It was dominated by a porcelain enamel prep table and a curious wall chart [an arterial venous and nervous systems map]. I didn't normally see the bodies before they were dressed and in casket. But one day my dad called me back there. The man on the prep table was bearded and fleshy, jarringly unlike dad's usual traffic of desiccated old people. The strange pile of his genitals was shocking, but what really got my attention was his chest, split open to a dark red cave. There was some practical exchange with my father during which I studiously betrayed no emotion. It felt like a test. Maybe this was the same offhanded way his own notoriously cold father had shown him **his** first cadaver. Or maybe he felt that he'd become too inured to death, and was hoping to elicit from me an expression of the natural horror he was no longer capable of. Or maybe he just needed the scissors. I have made use of the former technique myself, however, this attempt to access emotion vicariously.²⁷²

The voiceover in the scene is flat and unemotional, unlike the visual representation. It is not clear how old Alison is at the time, but from the drawing she appears to be about fourteen or fifteen. The dead man is presented plainly with his chest gaping open and his genitals flaccid but dominant, almost as dominant as the cut through which we can see inside his body. This is an incident that cannot be ignored. The underlying subject of sexuality (both Alison's and her father's) is so important and prominent throughout the book,

²⁷² Ibid. pp. 43-45.

that this particular presentation should not be reduced in analytic value. The close-up on the genitals and the open chest creates a link between male sexuality (male genitalia for sure) and death, a gaping, oozing, chaotic incision visually connected to the flaccid penis, via the axis of a straight line. Everything is there: Alison, the father, the death of manliness and the horror of masculinity (Plate 6.5). The voice over describes a father-daughter psychological encounter, but the illustration is talking about a whole different theme.



PLATE 6.5: *Fun Home*, p. 44

The incident of the dead body is presented in the chapter of *Fun Home* where the father's funeral takes place. Death and disgust, and complex feelings have been included in this representation of horror.

Two nights before the accident, or suicide, of her father, Alison has a dream about him: 'I dreamed that I was out at the bullpen with him. There was a glorious sunset visible through the trees. "Dad! C'mon! Lets go up the hill and see it!". At first he ignored me. I raced over the velvety moss in my bare feet. When he finally got there the sun had sunk behind the horizon and the brilliant colors were gone',²⁷³ (Plate 6.6). Although usually in comics books dreams tend to be presented with a different or distinct graphic style, in this case this, rather important, dream is not graphically different to the rest of the story.



PLATE 6.6: *Fun Home*, pp. 123-124

Bechdel distinguishes between dream and narration in her second novel *Are You My Mother*, in which all dreams appear with a black background to

²⁷³ Ibid. p. 124.

separate them from the rest of the story, but in this case she has not chosen to do so. The illustrations of the dream sequence are quite plain. The first panel has a dreamy quality, in depicting the hill, up which they have to climb in order to watch the sunset, as very stiff and heady, filled with thin, tall trees that block the sun and their way up. It is only a page long and when the reader turns the page there is a final panel, part of the dream but somehow independent showing the back of their heads (father's and daughter's) and the darkening hues of a dying sunset.

Alison dreams that she is in the "bullpen" with her father. This is an interesting place to be, according to the OED being: 'an enclosure for bulls/an exercise area for baseball pitchers/the relief pitchers of a baseball team/an open-plan office area/a large cell in which prisoners are held before a court hearing'.²⁷⁴ If this place had anything to do with baseball it would be flat and without trees, unlike the depicted area and it is certainly too rural to be an office area. No one could claim that it is a large cell either, but metaphorically this is the only interpretation that makes sense. What is even more intriguing is the fact that that the narrator never comes back to this word. There is always a possibility that it could be the name of the area, but even in this case the fact that it is not mentioned before or after, or explained in any way points to the fact that this metaphorical meaning of the prison cell –one where the prisoner is held before having to face the judgment in a courtroom too– is quite significant.

It is just a couple of months since Alison has made the confession about her sexuality to her parents, and it is likely that she still feels vulnerable to their judgment. However only the father is part of the dream, and the father has been the less judgmental of the two. Alison has long been looking for the approval of her father. And her father has been a persistent disappointment in letting her share her feelings and experiences with him, just like he fails to make it to the top of the hill in her dream. In the last panel of the dream Alison is angry or distraught, judging from her facial expression: 'You missed it! God, it was beautiful'.²⁷⁵ Two days later her father is found dead.

²⁷⁴ "bullpen". Oxford Dictionaries. April 2010. Oxford Dictionaries. April 2010. Oxford University Press. 25 October 2012

<http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/american_english/bullpen>.

²⁷⁵ Bechdel, *Fun Home : A Family Tragicomic*. p. 123.

His death makes her numb, not only because of grief, but also because of the unspoken, unresolved issues between her and her-now-dead-father. In the funeral scene the visual medium is used skilfully to produce an interesting effect. Two panels, one with an imaginary scenario and the other presenting what actually happened. During the greetings, in the course of the closed coffin funeral of the father, some relative, or family friend, or neighbour, but apparently someone completely unimportant to her, shakes Alison's hand and says: 'The Lord moves in mysterious ways'.²⁷⁶ In the first, the imaginary panel, she bursts out with what she really thinks: 'There's no mystery! He killed himself because he was a manic-depressive, closeted fag and he couldn't face living in this small-minded small town one more second',²⁷⁷ (Plate 6.7). Of course these things are impossible to be uttered during a funeral –or in any other social occasion– so she never atters any of that.



PLATE 6.7: *Fun Home*, p. 125 (detail)

Below this first panel there is a similar one, same sequence only centred a bit on the right where on hearing the same cliché she responds: 'Yes. He does', while at the same time she thinks in a thought balloon: 'I'd kill myself

²⁷⁶ Ibid. p. 125.

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

too if I had to live here'.²⁷⁸ In an alternative, graphic reality she has said what she thinks, in the second panel she is doing what is socially accepted. In both cases she is convinced that her father committed suicide. The reality of the comics medium, where these two realities are juxtaposed on equal terms presents them both as valid, even though one of them is imaginary. It is all the more an uncontested psychic reality, the reality in which she did not have to contain the oppressive feeling but had the opportunity to express them and feel better because of this. In this sense the writing of this comics sequence is a form of therapy, a way of communicating thoughts and feelings that have been burdening the carrier for years but they have been unable to express. The argument that the book is related to therapy is confirmed upon reading the sequel *Are You My Mother?*, which refers back to the time of the writing of *Fun Home*.

There is a six year gap between Bechdel's two memoirs, and the author has progressed during this time both personally and artistically. The publication and impact of the first book has influenced the construction of the second. Some themes recur in both books: the persistent voice over, the frequent literary and scholarly references, the graphic style. But in *Are You My Mother?* everything has become more pronounced, more esoteric, seemingly more mature and thought-through. While *Fun Home* is a book about Bechdel's childhood in which the protagonists are her parents –mostly her permanently restrained and cold father–, *Are You My Mother?* is primarily a book about her years of maturity, about herself and her quest to resolve psychological issues that have been tormenting her, rather than a book about her mother.

In her second book, Bechdel is in search of an inside truth, trying to tell a story in order to gain peace of mind, or at least to word her personal narration in the unique vocabulary of comics, to use the particular traits of this medium and the visual language in order to retell her life with all the consequences this would have upon the formation of her identity.

Psychoanalysis is explicitly prominent in *Are You My Mother?*. Bechdel is in therapy for the entire time-span of the book, and devotedly reading and reproducing psychoanalytic literature throughout the narration. Beyond the obvious, psychoanalysis is present even in the structure of the

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

book. Every chapter begins with a dream sequence, the narration of a real dream of the author which then initiates the themes which are presented in each section. Each dream is distinguished from the rest of the narration by a black background. Interestingly though, Bechdel doesn't use the black background only for the dreams. Flashbacks from her past, painful memories, realisations at the end of each chapter, they all are randomly presented on a pitch-black background as well, creating a confusion as to what is a dream and what is a memory, what is a thought and what is a revelation. It seems that this is deliberate, giving dreams and memories and insights the same value, the same power to reshape her concept of self, her understanding of Alison.

The dreams in the book are drawn in the same style as the rest of the book, defined only by the solid black background. What happens in them is obviously of a dreamy quality, the dreams are fluxing, all changing, elusive and hardly ever clear or direct. It is obvious from the content of the book, that all the included material has been thoroughly researched, revised and analysed. It is only expected that those dreams have been worked over, elaborated through many levels of censorship. The result is interesting, as interesting as the conscious decision for them to be included as an important part of the book.

Chapter five, entitled *Hate*, begins with a climbing dream:

I'm clinging to a precipice of ice. I can't tell how far it falls away below me. Somehow I have to haul myself up over the top. That's the only way the rescue helicopter can get to me. I manage to dig out a little square hole and wedge my arm into it. Now I can twist around and assess matters. The distance to the water is dizzying. I spit and a long moment later it hits the surface. Apparently I'm on an island. I can see the lights of the mainland. Then the dream fast-forwards and I'm safe at the top. I'm astonished to realise that the cliff had in fact been merely my childhood dome, covered in ice. Now it's melted. It's a beautiful spring morning. I've been hanging from the edge of the roof. Even if I had lost my grip, I couldn't have fallen far. I try to show a neighbour, then my father, how perilous it had been, how amazing that I managed to

save myself. But in this thawed, mild climate, it's impossible to convey the extremity of my situation.²⁷⁹

Alison is having this dream the night after her mother has read the first draft of *Fun Home*. The mother's initial response is not warm: 'She said my brother was there knocking out a wall of her garage with a concrete cutter, and she felt like, 'Christian is wrecking my garage, Alison is wrecking my life'.²⁸⁰ The mother's response to *Fun House* will remain ambiguous till the end.

However, the dream about climbing up a dangerous cliff, which is proved to be the paternal house, the 'fun home' that must have been the centre of her attention at the time she was writing the book, along with the feelings the memories would stir. 'This image of my childhood as an emotional deep freeze was the opposite, I'm certain, of the psychological atmosphere my parents thought they were providing'.²⁸¹ Bechdel goes on to present a scene where her father casually talks to her about psychoanalytic concepts, at an age that she probably would not have been able to comprehend them. He first talks about the Oedipus Complex, and then adds: 'Girls like their father best. That's an Electra Complex'. Alison responds to that: 'Do they have to?', just to get the matter-of-fact answer 'They just do'.²⁸² Bruce Bechdel's psychoanalytic insights however never seemed to find an application, other than casual chit-chat. On the contrary, his complicated persona has created so many confused feelings to his daughter, feelings which years after his death and years after therapy, she has not overcome. At the end of *Fun Home* Alison admits to the confusion: 'Perhaps my eagerness to claim him as "gay" in the way I am "gay", as opposed to bisexual or some other category, is just a way of keeping him to myself –a sort of inverted Oedipal Complex'.²⁸³ Bruce Bechdel has violated the most important rules of fatherhood. According to Winnicott: 'One of the things that a father does for his children is to stay alive during the children's early years. The value of this simple act is liable to be forgotten',²⁸⁴ however the absence is traumatic and haunting. Alison's conviction that he

²⁷⁹ ———, *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama*. pp. 162-163.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.* p. 164.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.* p. 167.

²⁸² *Ibid.*

²⁸³ ———, *Fun Home : A Family Tragicomic*. p. 230.

²⁸⁴ D. W. Winnicott, *The Child and the Family : First Relationships* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1957). p. 84.

committed suicide makes him not only negligent, but criminal. He has deprived his children of his presence and the reassuring feeling that even if not the best in the world, they still have a living father. In Alison's understanding, he has done it on purpose, which is unforgivable.

In the second chapter of *Are You My Mother*, Alison is talking about her first experience in therapy and how everything is interconnected: her depression, her father's death, her mother's detachment from her only daughter and her own professional angst. She addresses these issues, or tries to come to terms with most of them, by writing the book about her father, *Fun Home*. This is her way to let the steam out regarding his untimely death, to create a contact with her mother (though she probably has not been particularly successful in that) and at the same time it is the resolution of her career problems. *Fun Home* is the work that distinguishes her as an author and cartoonist, the book which paves the way for her second publication –in an even more complicated way it is the book that leads to the book in which she describes all this.

In this second chapter, however, she treats the book-in-progress as a means of containing – temporarily– the anxiety concerning the aforementioned situations and dealing with it from a safe distance. The second chapter of *Are You My Mother?* is her introduction to psychoanalysis. It starts off with a dream like every chapter of this book and then is presenting us with the narrator's first attempt to understand Freud: 'I had the spiderweb dream two years after the one about the book, and immediately after starting to read Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*. I was in the thick of writing the book about my father. I was carving out time for this from my job writing and drawing a comic strip'.²⁸⁵

The beginning of the chapter is a mixture of dream, analytic confessions, the narration of a distressing event and the recovery of an old, childhood memory. The material is very solid and very powerful, and cunningly shaped into a Freudian story: everything is there, trauma, rivalry, sexual anxieties and parental relations. A random accident of Alison is explained in the terms of *The Psychopathology of the Everyday Life*, and a

²⁸⁵ Bechdel, *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama*. p. 42.

revealing interpretation emerges: ‘Perhaps my unconscious was telling me to pay more attention to my unconscious’.²⁸⁶

Alison recalls her early sessions with Jocelyn, her first therapist, who has accepted as a fact Alison’s suspicion about her father’s death. This is the same session mentioned above, in which the therapist asks what her feelings are concerning her father’s suicide. Instead of bringing forth answers, this question provokes an overflow of feelings and stories and transferences to follow. As Alison delves into the psychoanalytic literature she grows more and more complex, and discovers more and more about the structure of her feelings and temperament. At about this time in her life, Alison discovers Donald Winnicott, and his work, which will be turned to a major point for the rest of the book, and possibly another transitional object –not Winnicott himself, or even the historical figure, but the character of Winnicott she creates to substitute for her long dead father.

Her personal life is portrayed along the way: therapy sessions, amorous nights with her lesbian partner and long conversations with her mother. In the meantime the psychoanalytic literature gets more and more profound, more and more webbed in to the concept of the book, which is filled with quotes and extended extracts drawing from the psychoanalytic tradition. Small details reveal how important this connection is. During this chapter and all the psychoanalytic revelations occurring, Alison will remember and talk about her mother nursing her, weaning her early and about her first actual transitional object, a teddy-bear named Beezum. Right at this time, Alison remembers an episode of OCD which took the form of crossing out every word she had been writing in her diary, an incident that has been described with some detail in *Fun Home* as well.

After her OCD took over her writing skills, Alison’s mother offered to help her by writing down everything her daughter dictates for a period of six weeks. Alison is at this stage ten years old, and it is the first time her mother pays significant attention to her older child. The episode is remembered tenderly, as a rare and valuable moment, exclusively about the two of them. Bechdel, who has not been kissed goodbye by her own mother since the age of seven, resolves to cherish and explore this memory through ‘reliving the past’

²⁸⁶ Ibid. p. 49.

in the books she authors. The book, like the old diary, draws the attention of her mother and makes her react to her daughter's doings. The therapist is now the 'mother' who listens to everything Alison has to say.

During her analytic sessions, Alison will sit down and let everything hurtful be talked away, or talked through. But the book she's writing –*Fun Home* at the time narrated in the book, but probably *Are You My Mother?* too in the real time of its composition– is a transitional object, a place where all conflicts, drama and pain are invested and discarded in order to create a new, comforting narration, a new life.

As she admits in her interview, Bechdel's books are intensively researched, and she makes full use of any material in the family archives or in the public domain. In *Are You My Mother?* we can see a very complex sequence, both graphically and narratively, when Alison realises that one of her favourite childhood snapshots is actually part of a pack of six successive photographs. We see the first photo, the one she has always liked, as she opens the subject on a right-hand page. It is a photograph of her mother holding her as a baby, playing peekaboo with her –baby Alison staring her mother straight in the eye, laughing happily. As we turn the page, the following two pages reconstruct Alison's drawing table: five more photographs scattered about, amongst pens and inkhorns, a rubber and Alison's glasses. The composite view is clearly the one of her everyday life, the place where she lives and works.

On top of this everyday life picture there are speech boxes that represent different levels of interpretation:

I don't have the negatives, so there's no way to know their [the photograph's] chronological order. But I've arranged them according to my own narrative. Mom is making faces and presumably sounds at me. In each shot I reflect her expression and the shape of her mouth with uncanny precision. [...]. For a long time I resisted including my present-day interactions with mom in this book precisely because they're so "ordinary". Then I started seeing how the transcendent would almost always creep into the everyday. In my arrangement of these photos the rapport between mom and me builds until I shriek with joy. Then

the moment is shattered as I notice the man with the camera. At three months, I had seen enough of my father's rages to be wary of him.²⁸⁷ (Plate 6.8).



PLATE 6.8: *Are You My Mother?*, pp. 32-33

On the surface, the obvious level of narration, Alison explains how and why she has arranged the photographs in this way. Afterwards she gives her interpretation on the content of the pictures. Although she cannot be sure about anything at all –not even about who is taking the picture– she reads explanations and patterns for her relationship with her mother, while at the same time, in distinct speech-balloons she is on an actual phone conversation with her mother. A pink speech box includes an extract of psychoanalytic literature: ‘ordinarily the woman enters into a phase, a phase from which she ordinarily recovers in the weeks and months after the baby’s birth, in which to

²⁸⁷ Ibid. pp. 32-33.

a large extent she is the baby and the baby is her'. Still looking for this lost trace of her mother's attention, affection and love Bechdel gives us the same instant proof that once her mother has been intimate with her, a psychoanalytic explanation, and the current situation which is certainly not easy or pleasant. In only two pages the author has created strong feelings and told a painful truth in a very dense and complicated way. The details in composition are of unique importance, like her inkhorn which is according to the label an old jar of Gerber (an old brand of baby food), underlining a need for her to feed herself with independence, not to expose her feelings like baby Alison is doing in the pictures.

CONCLUSION

Although some would argue that comics is a medium as old as art –or civilisation itself–, and indeed it permeates human history,²⁸⁸ the concept of the graphic medium studies is relatively new in an academic context. It is merely twenty years since *Maus* opened the door to scrutiny for comics, and much less since theories started developing and a general study was formed. Definitions and main themes are still under construction, and the literature on the subject is limited or, to be more accurate, fragmentary, focused on one aspect or another, but reluctant to deal with the concept as a whole. This has frequently challenged my attempt to approach the medium, making it difficult to navigate through and support my arguments with critical material and widely accepted theories. In my thesis I have attempted to correlate a theory of perception, based on psychoanalytic theory, and a close reading of a selection of texts, concentrated on autobiographies and personal memoirs. The choice of material was such in order to provide the narrative of a more straightforward connection with psychoanalysis, which, after being verified in this way, could apply to the medium in general.

Psychoanalysis is, to a large extent, a memory management tool through language, and this unique handling of the material of memory is used to unveil hidden or concealed truths and provide an understanding of the self, crucial to the construction of the idea of the self, that is identity. Freud has made clear in his work how much he values the properties of dreaming, and indeed this royal road to the unconscious is a busy highway that leads to more than one destination. Among other things, the dreaming has helped us to establish a connection with the medium of comics, in terms of a visual language that produces meaning far beyond its pictorial value. In the *Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud sets the ground for this connection:

Dream-thoughts and dream-content lie before us like two representations of the same content in two different languages –or rather, a particular dream-content appears to us as a version of the relevant dream-thoughts rendered

²⁸⁸ McCloud, *Understanding Comics*. pp 10-19.

into a different mode of expression, the characters and syntax of which we are meant to learn by comparing the original with the translation. [...]. Dream content is embedded, as it were, in a hieroglyphic script whose characters need to be translated one by one into the language of the dream-thoughts. One would clearly be led astray if one tried to read those characters in accordance with their pictorial value rather than with their significance.²⁸⁹

Freud moves on to compare the dreaming with a picture-puzzle (a rebus) which unlike ordinary visual arts does not rely solely on the power of the image, but on the ability of the interpreter to translate the material into spoken language by using visual clues encoded into the provided image. The dream-work uses several tricks, some visual and some not (compression, displacement, word-play incorporated into models of representation, the use of symbols and a complex secondary processing among others) in order to make this riddle as complicated as possible as long as it remains solvable. Mutatis mutandis, the same principle of reading and interpretation applies to comics, as Will Eisner writes in one of the first attempts to theorise the medium:

The format of comics presents a montage of both word and image, and the reader is thus required to exercise both visual and verbal interpretive skills. The regimens of art (e.g., perspective, symmetry, line) and the regimens of literature (e.g., grammar, plot, syntax) become superimposed upon each other. The reading of a graphic novel is an act of both aesthetic perception and intellectual pursuit'.²⁹⁰

²⁸⁹ Sigmund Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. J. A. Underwood (London: Penguin Books, 2006). pp. 293-294.

²⁹⁰ Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art: Principles and Practices from the Legendary Cartoonist* p. 2.

An interpretative dexterity on more than one level is essential in both cases. Freud concludes this theme with the following:

The words assembled in this way are no longer meaningless; in fact they can produce the most beautiful and most meaningful poetic aphorism. Well, a dream is a picture-puzzle like that, and our precursors in the field of dream-interpretation made the mistake of judging the rebus as a pictorial composition. As such, it struck them as nonsensical and valueless.²⁹¹

The same mistake has often been made regarding comics as well (part of the reason why they have been considered as valueless, a childish form of “low-art”). Already in 1985, Eisner pinpointed the psychological parameters of reading comics: ‘the psychological processes involved in viewing a word and an image are analogous’.²⁹² This structural analogy between the perception of the visual and prose, the repletion of the image and the usage of recognisable symbolism, he calls “the grammar of sequential art”. This function of the medium is what differentiates it from other narrative forms, and also what brings it so much closer to the function of the unconscious. The liberty of the artist on the page allows, according to Spiegelman ‘a visual narrative to not be a simple reiteration of the text’.²⁹³ On the same time, its function is not identical to other visual arts either, for instance Spiegelman explains how ‘[p]hotos tend to have too much information; it’s very hard to suppress the unnecessary. The work that actually works best deploys information visually to give you the necessary signs and not too much more’.²⁹⁴ By every means, comics function in a unique, versatile and meaning-bearing way.

In this thesis I have attempted to establish the connection of psychoanalysis and the unconscious with the function of the comics medium. Through the negotiation of trauma in the various characters I have dealt with (which is a memory-management process by all accounts) I have provided

²⁹¹ Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams*. p. 294.

²⁹² Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art: Principles and Practices from the Legendary Cartoonist* p. 2.

²⁹³ Spiegelman, *Metamaus : Art Spiegelman Looks inside His Modern Classic, Maus*. p. 168.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 168.

examples of how the structure of the medium provides an expression of the idea of the self which does not rely exclusively on the narration of autobiographical details. Artie in *Maus*, Pierre-François in *Epileptic*, Craig in *Blankets*, Marji in *Persepolis*, Alison in *Fun Home* (and her more mature character in *Are You My Mother?*), are all personae of authors who decided to narrate their stories in a medium that allowed them not only to present an account of their perception of their personal stories, but also unleash various traits of their personality, their pain and suffering, hidden and painful aspects of their understanding about themselves and their identity, onto a canvas which welcomes all sorts of outbursts in a graphically magnificent way. Their drawn characters onto the comics page have given depth to their experiences, and have allowed the artists, Art Spiegelman, David B., Craig Thompson, Marjane Satrapi, Alison Bechdel to hide (in a revealing way) little secrets in the gutters of the page, to provide clues to a more complex reality than one can see on the surface of a linear narration. The case I have argued applies well to the above mentioned works, due to their autobiographical nature, and the aspects of psychoanalysis are almost self-evident for the same reason. Yet I believe that all of the conclusions applicable to each one of these works, can find a wider application to the comics medium.

I will attempt to introduce briefly here the example of *Asterios Polyp* by David Mazzucchelli. An acclaimed graphic novel, a fictional biography unlike the rest of my material, taking place partly in the urban landscape of Ithaca, NY, partly in semi-rural Apogee, NY and partly in an imaginary non-place comprised of familiar cultural landmarks and abstract shapes. *Asterios Polyp* displays on the page the critical events in the imaginary biography of its namesake hero, and is an ideal example of how the construction of a biography evolves in a graphic environment. In *Asterios Polyp* we get to see how the constellation of the visual elements on the page –the full utilisation of the space on the page that characterises the novel– resembles the dream, in a different way than *Bones* does, as this is a work of fiction but not a fantasy novel, its function being enriched by reality aspects. The emotional geography of the shapes and shadows, the narrative of colour, the expressive power of the lines sketched by the comics artist, representing space and time, resembles the dreamwork and its ability to mingle shapes and facts, likenesses and events, and narrate them out

of context and in a distorted time-sequence in order to cloak and simultaneously uncover the mysteries of the Unconscious; as a cultural artefact, this graphic novel has absorbed and reflects elements of culture that is the Unconscious itself.

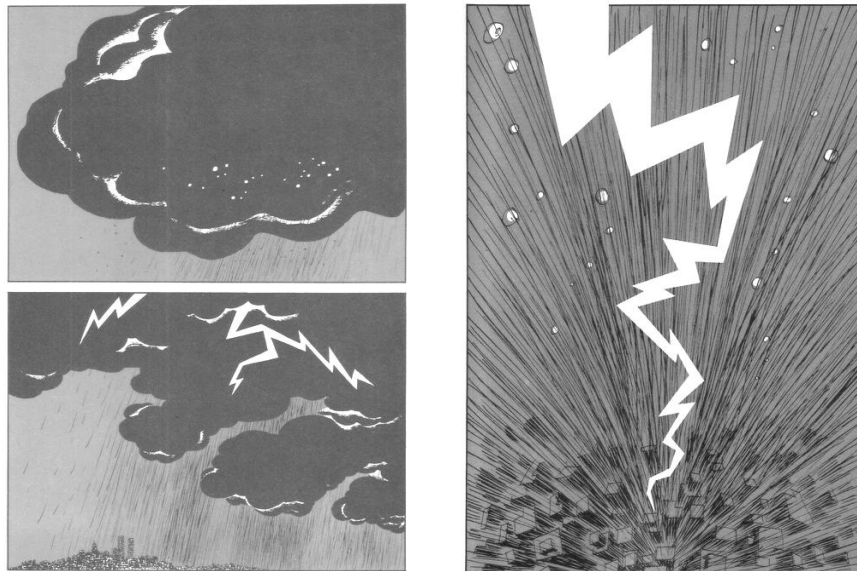


PLATE C.1: *Asterios Polyp*, pp. 6-7

Asterios Polyp begins with destruction (Plate C.1). A heavy cloud carries its thunder and lightening and casts them all the way down to a modern, urban block of apartments. The architectural reference is of significance, it sets the scene in a very particular landscape, which bears particular references regarding the space utilisation and cultural context. Christopher Bollas writes on the links between *Architecture and the Unconscious*:

Each city, [...] has its own structural integrity (the material realisation of imagined forms) through which we travel. Cities evolve their own interspatial relations as roads intersect, as parks are placed, as high streets are segregated from residential areas, as industrial parks are segregated from art centres and the like. If spatialization is the unconscious development of area according to the evolution of any city then interspatial relations would define the psychology of spaces as they relate to one

another and as they invite the citizen to move across boundaries and into new centres that define locations. Moving in this unconscious organisation of sites and their functions is the individual who will elect favoured paths and who will quite idiosyncratically find certain locations more evocative than others.²⁹⁵

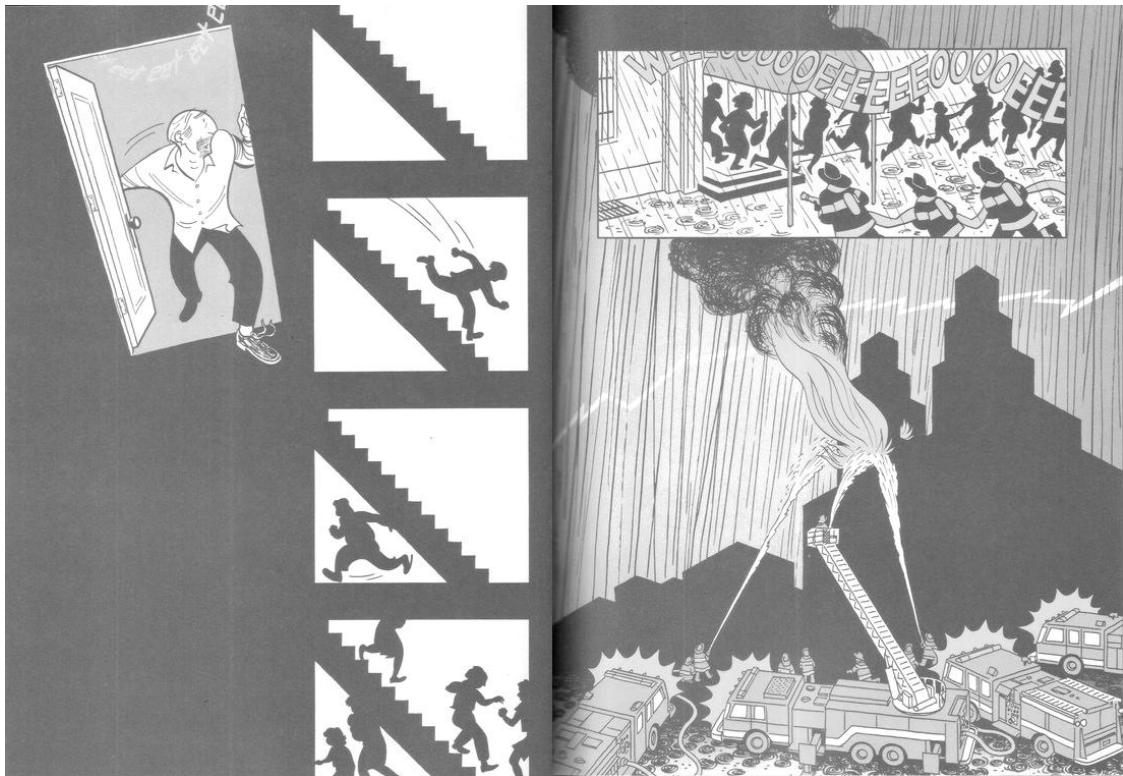


PLATE C.2: *Asterios Polyp*, pp. 14-15

As soon as the scene has been set we jump from the weather conditions to the interior of Asterios's apartment, which looks as if it has been through a major thunderstorm itself. First we see the lines of the sitting room, then a close up in the kitchen, the detail of unpaid bills on the desk, open doors and someone moaning. Asterios is lying on the bed, a human wreck. And that is when the layout of the page changes drastically. In the facing page the place is struck by lightning. The flash comes from outside of the panel borders, from the very edge of the page, the panel flashes in blinding white and purple shades, the shadows of things occupy the vision field. Next page: panels

²⁹⁵ Christopher Bollas, "Architecture and the Unconscious," *International Forum of Psychoanalysis* 9, no. 1 (2000). p. 34

collapsing into the page, the printed sound of the alarm swirling onto the space of the paper unrestricted by lines. Particular emphasis is given to the things Asterios chooses to save from the fire by dramatic close ups. Following page: entirely purple, used to its very edges, Asterios’s door opens to the nothingness of the empty page, his figure climbing down the stairs appears as a photographic negative (Plate C.2). The final three pages of the sequence are again coloured in total, like a gigantic poster, the fire intruding into the apartment, consuming everything, even the page space, erasing details and memories, leaving behind only the bright yellow of its glint.

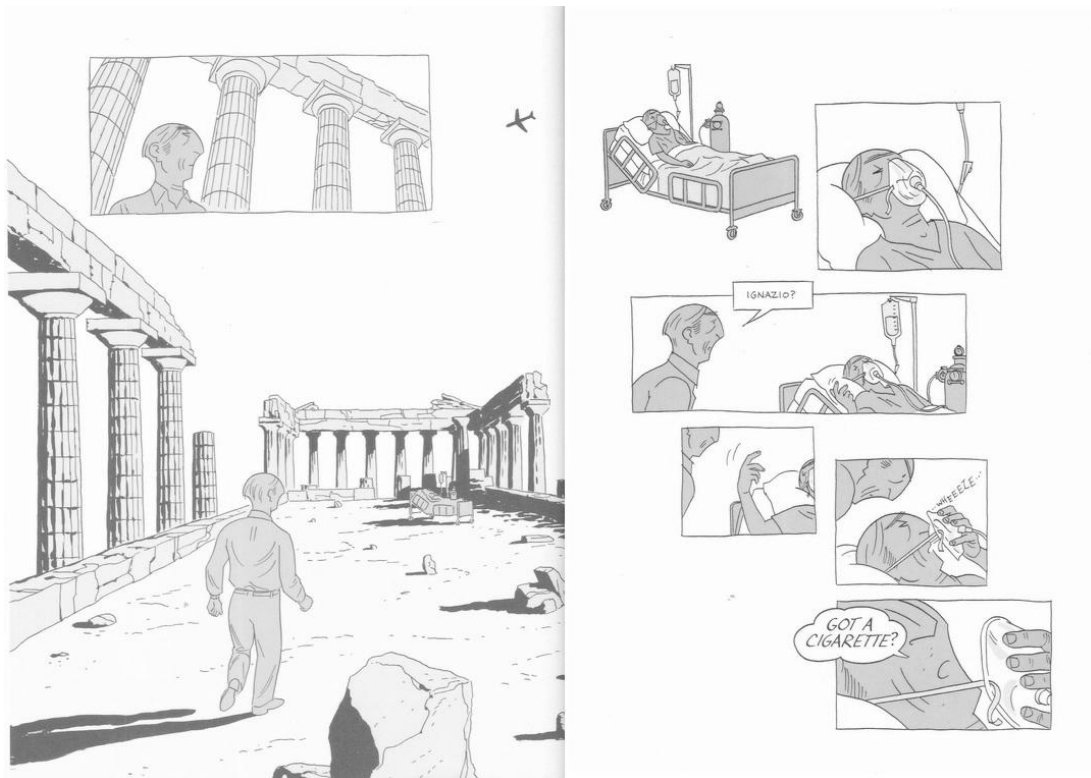


PLATE C.3: *Asterios Polyp*, pp. 44-45

In his essay on *Freud, Dreams and Imaginative Geographies*, Steve Pile points out how ‘dreams, evidently, are constructed out of spatial analogies and spatial relationships: i.e. there is a geography to dreams. Famously shapes are related to other shapes’.²⁹⁶ The same principle applies to the graphic medium, where the limited space of the page makes all shapes interconnected

²⁹⁶ Steve Pile, “Freud, Dreams and Imaginative Geographies” in Anthony Elliott, *Freud 2000* (Cambridge, Polity P., 1998). p. 214.

and structurally co-dependent. In her 2008 paper *Dreams Within Dreams; Books Within Books*, Hilary Hoge describes Khan's idea of the "dream space":

Patients who cannot distance themselves from the dream-content by placing it in a transitional space are unable to use the dream creatively, as they feel merged with their dreams. The capacity to envision multiple levels of reality to create a separate dream space is thus an important psychic function, which Khan believed develops in an adequately facilitating environment.²⁹⁷

And this is how the discussion on comics intertwines. Regarding comics in general and due to reasons previously mentioned, it has been particularly difficult for scholars to provide a conclusive definition for the term itself; the medium is vague enough to make giving an encapsulating definition hard. As in my work on *Bone*, I will again use Scott McCloud's definition, according to which comics are 'juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer'.²⁹⁸ McCloud has to present the most intent and focused theoretical piece of work, and in the form of comics itself. The value of this work lies exactly to its being written in the form it is trying to analyse; no such dense and comprehensive work has been presented since the publishing of *Understanding Comics*. In Asterios's journey to a new destination, the space of the page is used to its full potential. Inside and out of panels, the drawing "bleeds" in the page, reaches the edges; elements of design are spilt in bulge on the page; colours, shapes, icons and letters all mingle in one unified picture. New elements are introduced and 'acted out' by differentiating the colour shades. Asterios's dream-like visit to the architectural artefact of the Athenian Parthenon (Plate C.3) is dominated by yellow, the sketch of the temple occupies the whole page again, a distant airplane can be spotted in the right corner. In the next page is the illusion of his twin brother who never survived the womb, dying on a hospital bed. The length and shape

²⁹⁷ Hilary Hoge, "Within Dreams; Books within Books," *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 18(2008). p. 11.

²⁹⁸ McCloud, *Understanding Comics*. p. 9.

of the panels diversify the intensity of the scene, the time length of the sequence and its loose arrangement on the page gives the idea of something fluid, dream-like, as the sequence itself is. It is not an actual space, it is a dream space, a potential space where the internal battle takes place. Jared Russell writes: ‘The concept of potential space therefore describes a transitive difference between self and other more complex than the absolute difference between self and other that has been the object of classical reflection’.²⁹⁹ In his dreamy encounter with his long deceased twin, Asterios comes face to face with a hidden perspective of his own self.

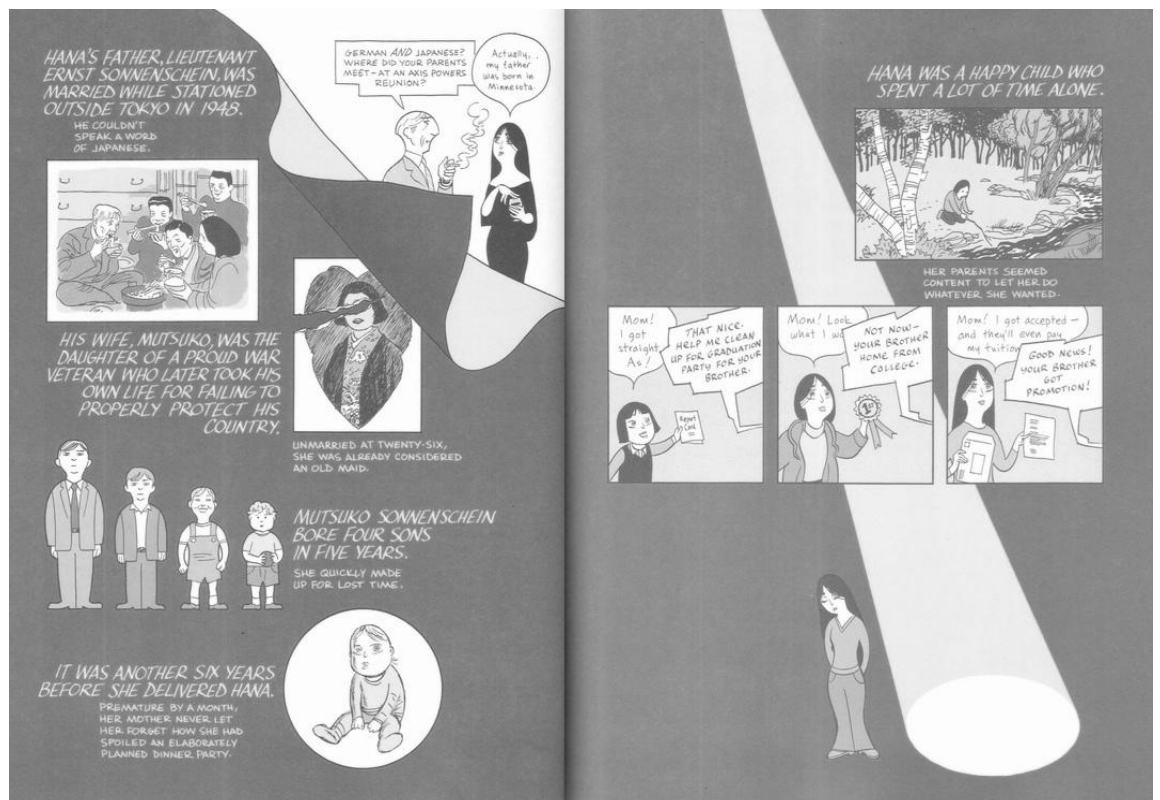


PLATE C.4: Asterios Polyp, pp. 57-58

When narrating Hana's (Asterios's wife's) life story, the page gets multidimensional (Plate C.4). The first layer, painted in pink contains anecdotes from Hana's ancestral history, but the pink page graphically folds to uncover the second layer of narrative, which is the point where Hana actually recites this story. Hana and Asterios are situated behind the central scene, located in the background, however still present. The reader gathers all the

²⁹⁹ Jared Russell, "Differance and Psychic Space," *American Imago* 60, no. 4 (2003). p. 508.

information for Hana's childhood, while seeing Hana as an adult all the same. A set of houselights always seem to miss the heroine showing Hana's immense loneliness and lack of self confidence while she was growing up. The space left blank on the page is vast. The reader can fill it up with any relevant material from their personal history, in a process structurally similar to that of the dreaming –though distinctly different in terms of content. *Asterios Polyp* is a perfect example of an intrusive work of art, and that is very much due to the way it utilises the space, giving the drawing total freedom to escape all traditional means of restriction, thus creating the illusion that its content can escape the paper any time and break in the reader's mind and real life. When Asterios's new friend and employer, Stiffly, announces to his wife that he has arranged for Asterios to rent their spare room, she reacts in an explosive way. The panel where Stiffly runs down the stairs with shoes and books and other everyday items thrown over his head is not lined up, it merges in the page. The following panel, located literally under the stairs, is enclosed in a proper lined up box, but the 'Slam'³⁰⁰ of the door escapes and spills on the otherwise blank paper. The last panel forms a triangle with the other two, increasing the impression of motion and turbulence. Comics manipulates our perception, but still gives us the utmost freedom to make what we want (and need) of it, to invest whatever psychical reality we experience in the final product. The perception of a story presented in comics is highly personal, and as such I believe that it can be traced back to the principles of psychoanalysis.

The duality in expressing the artist and being perceived by the reader in a psychoanalytic manner is what distinguishes the medium from other narrative forms. The comics page is not merely one where the author is ascribing a personal story, but also a place where the reader invests their own experience, an open-space of unconscious interactions, akin to a waking dreaming-place. In the *Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud compares dreams to hallucinations, more precisely he states that the dreaming process 'replaces thoughts by hallucinations'.³⁰¹ At the same time with the use of these hallucinatory images 'dream moulds a situation; it depicts something as present; it *dramatizes* an idea',³⁰² creating a distorted but perceived as credible reality for as long as the

³⁰⁰ David Mazzucchelli, *Asterios Polyp*, 1st ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 2009). p. 69.

³⁰¹ Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams*. p. 62.

³⁰² *Ibid.*

person is asleep. ‘Dream-elements’, Freud writes, ‘are not simply ideas –not at all. They are *true and actual experiences of the mind*, like those that in the waking state appear through the medium of the senses’,³⁰³ experiences which are accepted as reality by the sleeping mind. The process of consumption of narrative art is similar, for as long as the reader is submerged into the reality of the work, under the spell of the narration, anything is given credit, no matter how implausible it is. The absence of a standard linear process of narration in comics makes this space even more hallucinogenic, allowing the reader to dive even deeper into the reading experience.

The two aspects this thesis has attempted to outline (the creative process and the reader perception) are both tied closely, to the nature of the medium and its psychoanalytic projections. Dreams are an unconscious creative process, cunning and artful, with all their purposeful distortions and the concealed meanings. The process of dreaming is hardwired in the human brain however, and it is more than likely that this creative pattern is used more widely, when art is created and when art is consumed. The art of comics provides a mapping agent which can help us clearly trace this process, as it is particularly straightforward in this medium, as shown by the extensive examples analysed above. There is a way to go, in terms of research, a lot to be done, but the comics production is plentiful in fascinating publications and I strongly believe that the future in comics and the visual medium research is promising.

³⁰³ Ibid. p. 63.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- B., David. *Epileptic*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2005.
- Bataille, Georges. *Eroticism*. London ; New York: Boyars, 1987.
- Bechdel, Alison. *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2012.
- . *Fun Home : A Family Tragicomic*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2006.
- Bettelheim, Bruno. *Freud and Man's Soul*. N.Y.: Knopf, 1983.
- . *Recollections and Reflections*. London: Penguin Books, 1992.
- . *Surviving, and Other Essays*. 1st ed. ed. New York: Knopf, 1979.
- Bilu, Yoram. "The Moroccan Demon in Israel: The Case Of "Evil Spirit Disease"." *Ethos* 8, no. 1 (1980): 24-39.
- Bollas, Christopher. "Architecture and the Unconscious." *International Forum of Psychoanalysis* 9, no. 1 (2000): 28-42.
- . *The Shadow of the Object : Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known*. London: Free Association Books, 1987.
- Boynton, Robert S. "The Other Freud (the Wild One); New Translation Aims to Free the Master from His Disciples' Obsessions." *New York Times*, 10 June 2000.
- Brita Nilsson, et al. "Is Loneliness a Psychological Dysfunction? A Literary Study of the Phenomenon of Loneliness." *The Authors. Journal Compilation* (2006): 93-101.
- Buscombe, Edward, and Richard Collins. *Representation and Photography : A Screen Education Reader*. Houndsmills: Palgrave, 2001.
- Cassell, Eric J. "Illness and Disease." *The Hastings Center Report* 6, no. 2 (1976): 27-37.
- Castoriadis, Cornelius. *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*. Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1984.
- . *The Imaginary Institution of Society*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1987.
- . "The State of the Subject Today." *Thesis Eleven* 24, no. 5 (1989): 5-43.
- Chute, Hillary. "The Texture of Retracing in Marjane Satrapi's "Persepolis"." *The Feminist Press at the City University of New York* 36, no. 1/2 (2008): 92-110.
- Cohen, David. *The Escape of Sigmund Freud*. London JR Books 2009.
- Cuddon, J. A., and Claire Preston. *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. 4th ed. Oxford: Blackwell, 1998.
- Davies, Frederick B. "Three Letters from Sigmund Freud to Andréa Breton." *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 21 (1973): 127-34.
- Dawidowicz, Lucy S. *A Holocaust Reader*, Library of Jewish Studies. New York: Behrman House, 1976.
- Dictionary, Oxford English. ""Artificer, N."." Oxford University Press.
- Eisner, Will. *Comics and Sequential Art: Principles and Practices from the Legendary Cartoonist* The Will Eisner Library: Instructional Textbooks. New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 2008.
- Elliott, Anthony. *Freud 2000*. Cambridge,: Polity P., 1998.
- . *Social Theory and Psychoanalysis in Transition : Self and Society from Freud to Kristeva*. Oxford, UK ; Cambridge, USA: Blackwell, 1992.

- . *Subject to Ourselves : Social Theory, Psychoanalysis, and Postmodernity*. Cambridge, Mass.: Polity Press, 1996.
- Elmwood, Victoria A. "'Happy, Happy Ever After': The Transformation of Trauma between the Generations in Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*." *Biography* 27, no. 4 (Fall 2004): 691-720.
- Eric Luis Uhlmann, T. Andrew Poehlman, David Tannenbaum, John A. Bargh. "Implicit Puritanism in American Moral Cognition." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 47 (2011): 312–20.
- Fadiman, Anne. *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down : A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997.
- Felman, Shoshana, and Dori Laub. *Testimony : Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. New York: Routledge, 1991.
- Folkenflik, Robert. *The Culture of Autobiography : Constructions of Self-Representation*, Irvine Studies in the Humanities. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1993.
- Fresco, Nadine. "Nadine Fresco: Remembering the Unknown." *International Journal/Review of Psychoanalysis* (1984), <http://www.anti-rev.org/textes/Fresco84a/body.html>.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Interpretation of Dreams*. Translated by J. A. Underwood. London: Penguin Books, 2006.
- . *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia*. London: Penguin, 2005.
- . *The Unconscious* London: Penguin Books 2005.
- Freud, Sigmund, and Adam Phillips. *The Penguin Freud Reader*. London: Penguin, 2005.
- Freud, Sigmund, James Strachey, Anna Freud, and Angela Richards. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. 24 vols. London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1981.
- Fromm, Erich. *Psychoanalysis and Religion*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950.
- Frosh, Stephen. *Identity Crisis: Modernity, Psychoanalysis and the Self*. Basingstoke, etc.: Macmillan, 1991.
- Gay, Peter. *Freud : A Life for Our Times*. London: J.M. Dent, 1988.
- Gilmore, Leigh. "Limit-Cases: Trauma, Self-Representation, and the Jurisdictions of Identity." *Biography* 24, no. 1 (2001): 128-39.
- . *The Limits of Autobiography : Trauma and Testimony*. Ithaca, N.Y. ; London: Cornell University Press, 2001.
- Hass, Aaron. *The Aftermath: Living with the Holocaust*. Cambridge,: Cambridge U.P., 1996.
- Hirsch, Marianne. "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory." *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 14, no. 1 (2001): 5-37.
- Hoashi, Lisa. "Fluency in Form: A Survey of the Graphic Memoir." *The Missouri Review* 30, no. 7 (2007): 159-74.
- Hoge, Hilary. "Within Dreams; Books within Books." *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 18 (2008): 1-26.
- Keen, Sam. *Faces of the Enemy : Reflections of the Hostile Imagination*. San Francisco ; London: Harper and Row, 1988.
- King, Nicola. *Memory, Narrative, Identity : Remembering the Self, Tendencies*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000.

- Klein, Melanie. *Love, Guilt, and Reparation, and Other Works, 1921-1945*. Free Press ed, The Writings of Melanie Klein. New York: Free Press, 1984.
- Kristeva, Julia. *In the Beginning Was Love : Psychoanalysis and Faith, European Perspectives*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1987.
- LaCapra, Dominick. *History and Memory after Auschwitz*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998.
- Lagattuta, Liat Sayfan and Kristin Hansen. "Scaring the Monster Away: What Children Know About Managing Fears of Real and Imaginary Creatures." *Child Development* 80, no. 6 (2009): 1756-74.
- Laplanche, J., J. B. Pontalis, and Institute of Psycho-analysis (Great Britain). *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*. London: Karnac and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1988.
- Lentin, Ronit. *Re-Presenting the Shoah for the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2004.
- Lowry, Joanna, and David Green. *Stillness and Time : Photography and the Moving Image*. Brighton: Photoworks, 2006.
- Lykou, Evita. "Imagery: A Psychoanalytic Approach to Interpreting "Bone" ", University of York, 2009.
- Maturana, Humberto R. "Reality: The Search for Objectivity or the Quest for a Compelling Argument." *The Irish Journal of Psychology* 9 (1988): 25-82.
- Maturana, Humberto R., and Francisco J. Varela. *Autopoiesis and Cognition : The Realization of the Living*, Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science. Dordrecht, Holland ; Boston: D. Reidel Pub. Co., 1980.
- Mazzucchelli, David. *Asterios Polyp*. 1st ed. New York: Pantheon Books, 2009.
- McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1994.
- McGlothlin, Erin. "No Time Like the Present: Narrative and Time in Art Spiegelman's "Maus"." *Narrative* 11, no. 2 (2003): 177-98.
- MiNDTV35. "Alison Bechdel - Creating "Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic" ", 2009.
- . "A Conversation with Alison Bechdel." 2009.
- Mitchell, Stephen A. *Hope and Dread in Psychoanalysis*. New York,: Basic Books, 1993.
- Moseley, Marcus. "Jewish Autobiography: The Elusive Subject." *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 95, no. 1 (2005): 16-59.
- Naghibi, Nima, and Andrew O'Malley. "Estranging the Familiar: "East" And "West" In Satrapi's Persepolis 1." *ESC: English Studies in Canada* 31, no. 2-3 (2005): 223-47.
- Olick, J., and Jeffrey K. Olick. *States of Memory : Continuities, Conflicts, and Transformations in National Retrospection*. Durham [N.C.] ; London: Duke University Press, 2003.
- Payne, Michael. "What Difference Has Theory Made? From Freud to Adam Phillips." *College Literature* 32, no. 2 (2005): 1-15.
- Phillips, Adam. "After Strachey." *London Review of Books* 29, no. 19 (2007): 36-38.
- . "Close-Ups." *History Workshop Journal* 57 (2004): 142-49.
- . *Monogamy*. New York: Vintage Books, 1996.

- . *On Flirtation*. London, etc.,: Faber, 1994.
- . *On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored: Psychoanalytic Essays on the Unexamined Life*. paperback ed. London, etc.,: Faber, 1994.
- . *Terrors and Experts*. London: Faber and Faber, 1997.
- Quinodoz, Jean-Michel. *Reading Freud: A Chronological Exploration of Freud's Writings*. London: Routledge, 2005.
- Rifkind, Candida. "Drawn from Memory: Comics Artists and Intergenerational Auto/Biography." *Canadian Review of American Studies* 38, no. 3 (2008): 399-426.
- Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith. "What Can Narrative Theory Learn from Illness Narratives?" *Literature and Medicine* 25, no. 2 (2006): 241-54.
- Robin Varnum, Christina T. Gibbons (Ed.). *The Language of Comics: Word and Image*. Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2007.
- Ross, Kristin. *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture*, October Books. Cambridge, Mass., etc.,: MIT P., 1996.
- Russell, Jared. "Differance and Psychic Space." *American Imago* 60, no. 4 (2003): 501-28.
- Said, Edward W. *Freud and the Non-European*. London: Verso, 2003.
- . *Orientalism*, Penguin Classics. London: Penguin Books, 2003.
- . *Reflections on Exile : And Other Essays*, Convergences (Cambridge, Mass). Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 2001.
- Said, Edward W., Moustafa Bayoumi, and Andrew a Rubin. *The Edward Said Reader*. New York: Vintage Books, 2000.
- Satrapi, Marjane. *Persepolis*. London: Vintage 2008.
- Scambler, Graham. *Epilepsy, The Experience of Illness*. London,: Tavistock/Routledge, 1989.
- Schwab, Gabriele. "Replacement Children: The Transgenerational Transmission of Traumatic Loss." *American Imago* 66, no. 3 (2009): 277-310.
- Schwarz, Bill. "'Not Even Past yet'." *History Workshop Journal*, no. 57 (2004): 101-15.
- Segall, Kimberly Wedeven. "Melancholy Ties: Intergenerational Loss and Exile in Persepolis." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 28, no. 1 (2008): 38-49.
- Sheringham, Michael. *French Autobiography : Devices and Desires : Rousseau to Perec*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993.
- Shuter, William. "Sharing Our Humanity: The Psychological Power of the Catholic Mass." *American Imago* 63, no. 1 (2006): 7-23.
- Slattery, Dennis Patrick. "Seized by the Muse: Dostoevsky's Convulsive Poetics in *the Idiot*." *Literature and Medicine* 18, no. 1 (1999): 60-81.
- Smith, Anne-Marie. *Julia Kristeva : Speaking the Unspeakable*, Modern European Thinkers. London ; Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 1998.
- Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson. *Reading Autobiography : A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. Minneapolis ; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001.
- Sontag, Susan. *Illness as Metaphor, [and] Aids and Its Metaphors*. Harmondsworth,: Penguin, 1991.
- . *On Photography*. 1st Anchor Books ed. New York: Anchor Books, 1990.

- Spicer, Jakki. "The Author Is Dead, Long Live the Author: Autobiography and the Fantasy of the Individual." *Criticism* 47, no. 3 (2005): 387-403.
- Spiegelman, Art. *The Complete Maus*. London: Penguin Books, 2003.
- . *Metamaus : Art Spiegelman Looks inside His Modern Classic, Maus*. London: Viking, 2011.
- Squier, Susan M. "Literature and Medicine, Future Tense: Making It Graphic." *Literature and Medicine* 27, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 124-52.
- Thompson, Craig. *Blankets : An Illustrated Novel*. Marietta, Ga.: Top Shelf, 2007.
- Varela, Humberto D. Maturana and Francisco J. *To Δέντρο Της Γνώσης (El Arbor Del Conocimiento)*. Athens: Katoptro, 1992.
- Wiltshire, John. "Biography, Pathography and the Recovery of Meaning." *The Cambridge Quarterly* 29, no. 4 (2000).
- Winnicott, D. W. *The Child and the Family : First Relationships*. London: Tavistock Publications, 1957.
- . *Playing and Reality*. London ; New York: Routledge, 1989.
- Wood, Michael "There Is No Cure." *London Review of Books* 28, no. 13 (2006): 3-7.
- Wright, Elizabeth. *Speaking Desires Can Be Dangerous : The Poetics of the Unconscious*. Malden, Mass.: Polity Press, 2000.
- Zaretsky, Eli. *Secrets of the Soul : A Social and Cultural History of Psychoanalysis*. Repr. 2004 ed. New York: Vintage Books, 2005.