The Space Between:  
A Narrative Approach to  
Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*

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Graphic memoir, or “autography” as it has come to be called, presents interesting challenges to narratology’s descriptions of how narrative levels operate.¹ The neologism itself reflects theorists’ awareness that graphic memoir stretches the received boundaries of genre. In current critical usage, “memoir” places the focus on the person or object being memorialized, but “autography,” like the word from which it is derived, “autobiography,” suggests that the subject of the narrative is the author/artist herself. *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, Alison Bechdel’s breakout 2006 bestseller, is both a memoir of her closeted gay father who committed suicide and an autobiography detailing her own growing up and coming out. Continuing the play on genre-mixing, *Fun Home* embodies the pun “tragicomic” in that it uses comics form to tell a tragic story that is hilariously funny. It is “graphic” in all senses of the word:

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rendered pictorially, it presents explicitly detailed bodies in poses seldom seen in mainstream media, from naked corpses being embalmed to equally naked college students making lesbian love. “Auto-graphy” suggests the writing of the self, the drawing of the self, and even the signature, or autograph, indicating the authentic imprimatur of the self. In its slippery multiplicities “autography” is a good term for Bechdel’s text, which in many ways seems to elude formal description. When the autographer is as self-consciously interested in the process of creating narrative as Alison Bechdel is, this new genre provides a view of how narrative can construct subjectivity that adds unanticipated dimensions to currently circulating models of narrative poetics. Autography in Fun Home takes narrative from the dual model of story and discourse into a third dimension and beyond.

Just as narratologists have described narrative in binary terms like “story and discourse,” “fabula and “sjuzet,” or even the time-worn “showing” and “telling,” scholarly commentators on autography tend to speak of comics as a dual form, this one composed of the “verbal” and the “visual.” Hillary Chute, whose early career has been devoted to conceptualizing the field of comics theory, writes that “Comics might be defined as a hybrid word-and-image form in which two narrative tracks, one verbal and one visual, register temporality spatially” (2008, 452). Because it acknowledges the verbal narrative track, this definition better fits graphic memoir than does the one cartoonist-theorist Scott McCloud proposes for “comics” in Understanding Comics: “Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (1994, 9). McCloud is reaching for a definition that can cover much more than the genre of contemporary graphic memoir, so he subsumes the verbal narrative track in the phrase “other images.” Bechdel herself, in discussing her art, talks about the “words and the images” as two separate but complementary entities. Bechdel’s elaboration on the structure of her own cartooning, however, suggests an opening into further dimensions less easy to articulate than the verbal or the visual. As she explained in a 2007 lecture, “What I loved about cartooning was what I had learned from Charles Addams, that the space between the image and the words was a powerful thing if you could figure out how to work with it” (2007, 2)2 A close look at Fun Home shows that this text operates through many more layers—on many more narrative levels—than two, because both the visual and the verbal subdivide into multiple separate and overlapping narrative tracks, creating narrative elements that “work with” the space between image and words.

This essay will consider some of the alternate structures of narrative form that Fun Home exemplifies. In Part I, I will consider how autography, by
adding the visual element, multiplies the diegetic levels or storyworlds beyond those recognized by theorists of traditional prose autobiography. Next I will complicate the “dual” model of graphic memoir’s being comprised of a verbal layer and a visual layer by discussing the division of the verbal layer between voice-over narration and dialogue. Part I concludes with an analysis of how the multiple levels introduced by comics art and intertextual references in Fun Home draw in the reader of autobiography through means that are not available to traditional autobiography. Part II explores how Bechdel’s text breaks the dual structure of “story” and “discourse” by using “the space between” words and pictures to extend possibilities for the representation of consciousness. In Part III I begin an analysis of ways Bechdel uses the flexible genre of autographics to create a multi-dimensional storyworld.

I. Multiplying Diegetic Levels

In terms of narrative levels, all graphic memoir departs from the structure of ordinary autobiography. Broadly speaking, prose autobiography inhabits two diegetic locations, the space in which the present self speaks and the space in which the past self experiences the details that constitute the story. In other words, autobiographical narrative occupies two levels of diegesis: as Genette called them, the intradiegetic (the world inside the story) and the extradiegetic (the world inhabited by the autodiegetic narrator, in this case the older self). When speaking of prose fictions that imitate autobiographical writing, like Jane Eyre or David Copperfield, narrative theorists refer to “Jane the narrator and Jane the character” or “David the narrator and David the character” to make the distinction between the two narrative levels. Autobiographies that are not fictional contain figures which parallel the narrator and the character, although, strictly speaking, in autobiography there is no “character” because the protagonist of the story is supposed to be the author him- or herself. In terms of diegetic levels, then, prose autobiography is two-dimensional. The boundaries between the two dimensions are loose ones, since the same speaking subject, the narrator who is also the protagonist of the life story, exists in both (or, to put it in Genette’s terms, the narrator is autodiegetic). Autography adds at least a third dimension and—in the case of Fun Home—more levels within that third one.

At the third diegetic level in autobiography are the pictures: the avatars of Alison, her family, and their friends and acquaintances. Nowhere in Fun Home does Alison the narrator introduce a cartoon image of her present self; all the drawings represent phases of the past self she recreates through the graphic memoir. The images of the wide-eyed little girl, the grimacing teenager, the depressed college student, and the daughter of a father who has committed suicide correspond to what in prose narrative would be called
“Alison the character,” but in their pen-and-ink materiality they exist independently of what we mean when we talk about characters in prose texts. In discussing Alison’s “character” we might refer to her ambivalence towards her brilliant, creative, yet emotionally remote mother and father; her childhood desire to wear boys’ clothing and resistance of the feminine norms placed on her by her rural Pennsylvania surroundings; her resentment of the chores she had to do to support her father’s funeral business and his home-decorating efforts; her lifelong habits of reading fiction, writing journals, and drawing cartoons; her realization at college that she is a lesbian; her shock and disappointment when her coming out to her parents gets upstaged by the revelation of her father’s closeted gayness; her surprising inability to grieve and disconcerting tendency to laugh over her father’s early death. The representation of the youthful Alison’s emotions, attitudes, values, and conflicts add up to the characterization of the protagonist. Drawings are not essential to characterization, and they are obviously not a required feature in traditional prose narrative or autobiography. *Fun Home* shows how the addition of the visual images to the verbal narration that occurs in autobiography can produce a depth-effect to characterization that goes beyond what prose autobiography typically can achieve.

Theorists of comics have been working over the past two decades to articulate the relationship between image and text in cartooning. Some, like Charles Hatfield and Rocco Versaci, use literary-critical models for discussing comics, and others, like Thierry Groensteen, repudiate literary criticism in favor of a more radically visual emphasis. Critics working from both positions, however, tend to think along binary lines, separating the comics form into dual, opposing elements corresponding to “word” and “image.” In a particularly illuminating discussion of the distinctions between prose autobiography and graphic memoir, Hatfield typifies this dominant way of thinking about comics in binary terms:

> The cartoonist projects and objectifies his or her inward sense of self, achieving at once a sense of intimacy and a critical distance. It is the graphic exploitation of this duality that distinguishes autobiography in comics form most autobiography in prose. Unlike first-person narration, which works from the inside out, describing events as experienced by the teller, cartooning ostensibly works *from the outside in*, presenting events from an (imagined) position of objectivity, or at least distance. (Hatfield 2005, 115)

Hatfield is perfectly candid about the binarism of his model for comics, laying his argument over a framework of oppositions such as “projects and objectifies,” “intimacy and distance,” “inside out . . . outside in.” This dualistic approach breaks down, though, even in Hatfield’s prose, as for instance when he asserts that “comics tend to present rather than narrate—or, at times, alter-
nately present and narrate" (2005, 115). His good-faith effort to describe the workings of comics by doubling his terms (“to present rather than narrate”) runs astray at the dash that breaks the logic of his sentence. Acknowledging that comics don’t either present or narrate, his analysis doesn’t take the next step to push beyond the logical compromise implicit in “alternately present and narrate.” Comics theory needs to push past that dual model, and post-classical narratology can help. If classic structuralist narratology was all about sorting narrative devices into “this or that,” the contextual narrative theories being practiced today are more interested in going beyond the binaries in order better to understand how narratives work.4

While Bechdel, like Chute and Hatfield, speaks of only two “layers,” the words and the pictures, in her narrative practice, closer scrutiny shows that there are at least three operative layers in her comics, two of them verbal, the third pictorial. [Figure 1]. The first verbal level is the extradiegetic voice-over narration, printed in a font that looks like free-hand capital letters, always filling borderless horizontal boxes that run above the panels of the cartoon (“Not only were we inverts. . .”), sometimes also filling bordered insets that interrupt the illustrations (“While I was trying to compensate. . .”), and sometimes making small humorous remarks in boxes shaped like arrows that fill in background information or else literally make pointed reference to ironies within the pictured scene (“Least girly dress in the store”). The second verbal level is the intradiegetic dialogue, representations of words spoken inside the narrative world, encircled in dialogue balloons and set in the same font as the voice-over (“Why can’t I wear my sneakers?”). Third, of course, is the level of the cartoons themselves, drawings that sometimes illustrate what the voice-over is saying, sometimes contradict it; sometimes reproduce the protagonist’s youthful perspective, and often make her the object of the narrative gaze (here, both from a disembodied perspective behind Alison—disembodied because the viewer is not reflected in the mirror—and as the virtual viewer standing behind her would see Alison’s reflection). This pictorial level is where we find the cascade of reproduced pictures and copied texts that add a multiplicity of narrative dimensions unprecedented in other narrative genres. These include drawings of pictures and maps copied from books; original maps drawn by Bechdel; copies of handwritten and typed letters, notes, and diary pages; hand-inked copies of photographs, newspapers and book pages; drawings based on photographs; and drawings of books whose titles are clearly legible on the bindings. [Figure 2] Each of these classes of images gestures in the direction of different diegetic levels, multiplying the worlds invoked by the narrative structure of Fun Home.

As Jared Gardner (2006), Ann Cvetkovich (2008), and Valerie Rohy (2007) have each observed, all these representations of items like photo-
graphs, maps, letters, and diary pages in *Fun Home* constitute an archive, a collection the archivist (in this case the autographer herself) puts together in an attempt to make a coherent narrative of a life. As Gardner puts it, “We can see the collection as fundamentally an autobiographical narrative, one told by the arrangement of texts and images from the past to tell a story to the present” (2006, 801). The archived items in *Fun Home* do tell a story, and they are telling it at a narrative level distinct from either the extradiegetic voice-over narrator or the intradiegetic drawings of characters and renditions of dialogue.

Images like a reproduction of a Charles Addams cartoon, or of a map from *Wind in the Willows*, or of a newspaper headline, or of a family photograph are all gestures toward real-world referents, objects that have a material existence outside the text. The implied reader would recognize the Addams cartoon and the map of Toad’s wild ride, might look up the headline at the library, should have a box full of similar family photographs. As material objects hailing the implied reader from the reader’s world, they carry an affective weight of their own. Cvetkovich comments:

> As adept with print sources as visual ones, Bechdel . . . lovingly reproduces pages of print text from both literary and handwritten sources, often blowing them up beyond their usual size so as to emphasize their material qualities and emotional meanings. Bechdel thus creates an ‘archive of feelings,’ using the intensive labor of her drawing to become an archivist whose documents are important not merely for the information they contain but because they are memorial talismans that carry the affective weight of the past. (Cvetkovich 2008, 120)

I would add, that’s not just the autographer’s past, but the implied reader’s, too.

The materiality implied by those images works together with other features of the text to give *Fun Home* an aura of embodiment that distinguishes it from prose autobiography and that can’t be explained within Scott McCloud’s rubrics of cartooning. McCloud’s books—particularly his first, *Understanding Comics* (1993) and his most recent, *Making Comics* (2006)—provide a comprehensive poetics of cartooning, with explanations for the semiotics of everything from the gutter between frames in a strip to the delineations of emotion on a character’s face. Like the good formalist that he is, McCloud seeks universal descriptions for the elements of comics. As a result, he does not attend to differences that gender and sexuality might make in one’s approach to that art.5

The feminist and lesbian content of *Fun Home* is manifest, as is the queer refusal either to celebrate or to condemn the protagonist’s father for his life as a closeted gay man who preferred high-school boys as his sexual partners. Less obvious are the gendered ways that the material body comes into the
text. Chute has said of all comics that “the non-transparency of drawing—the presence of the body, through the hand, as a mark in the text—lends a subjective register to the narrative surfaces of comics pages that further enables comics works to be productively self-aware in how they ‘materialize’ history” (2008, 457). In addition to achieving this effect, Bechdel’s text gestures toward the material body in at least two distinct ways. One is the representation of her own hand holding the subject of the voice-over narration. A striking example of this is what Bechdel in her lecture called the “centerfold,” a photograph of Roy—her father’s youthful object of desire—sprawled semi-nude on a bed, which Bechdel has said is at the center of the book because it is the starting point of the story of her coming to terms with her father’s sexuality. The drawing of the photograph includes a representation of the autographer’s hand holding the photo, “bleeding” off the page as if to imitate the reader’s own hand holding the book. As Julia Watson observes, “The photo of Roy’s body as a vulnerable, yet cheesecake, spectacle is held by the twice-life-sized fingers of a left hand; it reminds us of our complicity as viewers in this intimate glimpse, as our hand holding the book overlaps hers” (2008, 40-41). In other words, the picture of the hand makes the implied reader mindful of how directly he/she is involved in the autographer’s search for a meaningful narrative. To Watson’s insight I would add one borrowed from McCloud’s narratology, by pointing out that the edges of the centerfold extend beyond the edge of the printed page. This technique, “known in the print industry as a ‘bleed’” according to McCloud (2006,162), boosts the impact of images not just because of the increased panel size—but also because they’re no longer fully contained by the panel border and can, well... “bleed” into our world—or perhaps because we’re conditioned by the panel-as-window experience—and if a window frame has passed beyond our peripheral vision—it usually means we’re through it. (McCloud 2006, 163-64 [Figure 3])

By drawing implied readers’ attention to their own hands holding the book, it also reminds actual readers of our own embodiment.

Less obvious on a first reading but equally effective in bringing the material body into the text is Bechdel’s practice of taking snapshots of herself posing for each of the characters in every frame, then drawing from the snapshots. If the purpose of this is, as Bechdel has explained, to get every bodily gesture, every wrinkle in the clothing, every angle just right, it also serves to give the drawings an almost palpable physicality, interestingly gendered in that Bechdel poses herself, appropriately costumed, for both male and female characters [Figures 4 and 5]. Added to the multiple representations of what Watson calls “the erotic and necrotic” bodies in the text (including people who are cross-dressed, engaged in sexual acts, or laid out on the funeral
director’s table, 35), these manifestations of the body in Fun Home add a material dimension to comics that McCloud’s gender-blind system can’t quite account for.

II. The Space Between the Verbal and the Visual in Fun Home

The juxtaposition of cartooning with verbal memoir offers methods of representing subjectivity that are unprecedented in traditional autobiography. Indeed, as Versaci asserts, “while many prose memoirists address the complex nature of identity and the self, comic book memoirists are able to represent such complexity in ways that cannot be captured in words alone” (2007, 36). Versaci enumerates the comics form’s methods for creating a narrative subjectivity as direct address (as when the narrator’s avatar is pictured as speaking directly to the reader in text that is drawn within word balloons), thought bubbles, and text boxes, which allow for a disjuncture in time between the narrating self and the experiencing self, or the present voice and the past character (39). Within the limitations of his binary model, Hatfield sketches out some of the salient differences between the ways subjectivity is rendered in autobiography and prose autobiography:

Hatfield invokes the classic but controversial assertion made in the late 1970s by Elizabeth Bruss, that there is no cinematic equivalent of autobiography, in order to draw a parallel between the representation of self in film and in comics. Bruss’s observation is appropriate to autography because, as Hatfield explains, “visual narrative tends to dismantle the first-person point of view, dividing the person seeing from the person seen” (2005, 117). To Hatfield’s insights here I want to add my contention that the protagonist of autography is a subject constructed not just through words and pictures, but in the space between the two media.

That “space between” presents itself as a solution for the inadequacy of words or images to the task of representation of the self. For example, in “The Canary-Colored Caravan of Death,” the fifth chapter of Fun Home, Bechdel narrates her childhood struggles with the slipperiness of the narrative signifier. The cartoonist depicts herself as a ten-year-old given to habitual actions, scrupulously lining up her shoes by her bedside, kissing every stuffed animal good night in sequence, avoiding certain articles of clothing on particular days of the week, and even diagnosing her own disorder—with the help of
Dr. Spock—as compulsiveness born of repressed hostility toward her feuding parents. The fifth-grader begins keeping a diary, at first writing down daily events without comment, but soon beginning to interpolate “the minutely-lettered phrase I think” (2006, 141) between the mundane accounts of activities. “It was a sort of epistemological crisis,” her voice-over narrator explains. “How did I know that the things I was writing were absolutely, objectively true? All I could speak for was my own perceptions, and perhaps not even those. My simple, declarative sentences began to strike me as hubristic at best, utter lies at worst. The most sturdy nouns faded to faint approximations under my pen.” (141). This sequence of drawings alternates images of the ten-year-old’s diary where the tiny “I thinks” interrupt the daily narrative with renditions of young Alison both performing the tasks she told her diary about and writing worriedly in her journal. Here the voice-over narrator takes the kind of leap into metanarrative territory that Fun Home teaches the reader to expect: “My I thinks were gossamer sutures in that gaping rift between signifier and signified. To fortify them, I perseverated until they were blots” (142). The I thinks soon turn from words into a “shorthand version,” a “curvy circumflex” that at first comes between declarative statements in the diary and eventually covers whole passages. Gardner has very aptly described the “curvy circumflex” as “an estimator or a placeholder for facts yet unrecorded,” reminiscent of “the caret used over a variable as an estimator (used in statistics to represent the unknown); or, more familiar to humanists, like the proofreading symbol indicating where additional text should be inserted” (2008, 4). I would say that it’s not so much “text” that’s missing from Alison’s diary, but the sense that the signifier and signified ought to come together in a coherent sign.

Before coming to the conclusion of the sequence—in which Alison’s mother helps her break the compulsive habits, partly by taking dictation rather than letting Alison herself write in the diary—the chapter reproduces many elements of the autographer’s archive: a photograph of her father as a young man, copies of handwritten and typewritten letters from him to her mother during their courtship, his newspaper obituary, a topographical map of part of the state of Pennsylvania, a representation of the map of Toad’s neighborhood from The Wind in the Willows juxtaposed with a strikingly similar map of the area where the Bechdels lived, and several silhouettes. The voice-over narrator presents the maps, especially the Wind in the Willows map with its tiny illustrations of the characters moving among the markers for the locations, as a solution for the problem of the slipperiness of signification: “The best thing about the Wind in the Willows map was its mystical bridging of the symbolic and the real, of the label and the thing itself. It was a chart, but also a vivid, almost animated picture” (2006, 147). Of course, as Bechdel
would acknowledge, the drawing of Mr. Toad in his automobile is not “the
real” or “the thing itself”; the drawing is, like the words, just another signifi-
er carrying multiple connotations and denotations into the cartoon frame.
The proliferation of significances that comes with the drawing do not close
the gap between language and the reality it seeks to represent, but they do
begin to fill up the space in that gap with levels of meaning the words alone
cannot carry.

Speaking about her choice to become a cartoonist, Bechdel has said
about that same map:

The cool thing about this map was that it was a map, with a symbolic overlay
of labels, and the compass, but if you looked up close, it was an almost
animated depiction of reality—you could see Mr. Toad careening along in
his motorcar. And it was this bridging of symbol and reality, of the label and
thing itself, that was so exciting. The endless slippage between signifier and
signified that was so troubling to me in my diary entries seemed somehow
to come to rest here—or at least pause. . . . Cartoons are like maps to me, in
the way they distill the chaotic three dimensional world into a layer of pictures and
a layer of words. (Bechdel 2007, 4, my emphasis)

For Bechdel, then, the map or the cartoon can bring signifier and signified
together into a sign that depends simultaneously on the layer of pictures and
the layer of words to represent the effect of a coherent subjectivity. At the
same time, she is illustrating how to work with that “space between the
image and the words” that she calls “a powerful thing if you could figure out
how to work with it” (2007, 2).

The voice-over Alison-narrator usually speaks in abstractions—about
family dynamics, literature, her own emotional experience, for instance.
McCloud would say—and I would agree—that because the realms of the
visual and the aural come through drawings rather than through language,
the images of people and places in autography are more vivid, fixed, and con-
crete than the “sensory aspects” of verbal description. This is a way to think
about how cartooning solves the problem for Bechdel of the slipperiness of
the signifier. One difference between the verbal journal or autobiography
and the graphic memoir or autography is that in a text like Fun Home there’s
no need for language to carry the whole weight of the visual—the physical-
ity of things, of the body, is unnarratable in words, so the drawings stand in
for the curvy circumflex as signs pointing to the gap in signification. Fun
Home itself is the corrected version of Alison’s journal. Where she had left
holes marked with the “curvy circumflex,” Fun Home fills in with pictures. A
look at the experiences Alison the narrator tells us Alison the avatar omitted
from her journal brings us back to embodiment. Of one “camping trip/initia-
tion rite” the narrator remarks,
Considering the profound psychic impact of that adventure, my notes on it are surprisingly cursory. No mention of the pin-up girl, the strip mine, or Bill's .22, just the snake—and even that with an extreme economy of style. Again the troubling gap between word and meaning. My feeble language-skills could not bear the weight of such a laden experience. (Bechdel 2006, 143)

The weight, that is, of the visual and the physical, the embodied—all that part of experience that defies prose description but finds itself expressed in the lines and shadings of the cartoon.

III. Autographic Representation of the Storyworld

While the pictures in Fun Home carry significance that prose narration might not be able to express, they also obviate the need for the prose to detail sights, sounds, and even smells. In Fun Home there are very few verbal descriptions, though there are many descriptive figures of speech, particularly metaphors and similes. The few exceptions bring color into the black-and-white imagery of the drawings. (“His skin was gray, which gave his bright blond crewcut the effect of yellow tint on a black-and-white photograph” (Bechdel 2006, 148), or “The infinite gradations of color in a fine sunset—from salmon to canary to midnight blue—left [my father] wordless” (150).)

In the first of these descriptions the simile (the hair against the dead boy’s skin looks like a yellow tint on a black-and-white photo) serves the sharpening of the visual image, evoking a special kind of visual relationship of yellow to gray. The less metaphorically couched narrative description of the sunset, however, holds even more allusive meaning, as two of the specific colors the narrator names, “canary” and “midnight blue” are the subject of a muted struggle twenty pages earlier in the text, in which her father obsessively corrects his little daughter’s coloration of a picture of Mr. Toad’s “canary colored caravan” in “a crayonic tour de force” (131), taking the picture out of her hands to put canary yellow where she had been putting midnight blue. The scene is part of a sequence about ways in which the Bechdel parents neglect their children’s early artistic impulses, absorbed as they are in the creative projects that Alison the narrator comes to realize were the parents’ strategy for holding family life together in the face of the irresolvable problem of her father’s closeted homosexuality. The mentions of canary and midnight blue in the sunset scene recall the struggle between young Alison and her father, while the narration is juxtaposed with an image that does not exactly contradict but certainly complicates the verbal narrator’s account of their relationship: a beautiful silhouette showing a silent, companionable moment between them as they look at the gray-washed sky of the comics panel [Figure 6]. The narration is only enumerating some of the sky’s colors.
and remarking that they leave Alison’s father wordless; the drawing, though, shows the daughter safely anchored with her hand on a gate, leaning towards her father, who leans against the other side of the gate, inclined away from his child, but permitting her carefully balanced approach to him. The wordless tableau says more about the emotional dynamics between the two characters than could be expressed in many pages of homodiegetic narration.

Consistently, the voice-over text boxes contain minimal or no description of the body, the landscape, the interiors—aside from rendering colors, the work of representing the visual is carried by the drawings. Nor does autography contain speech tags or the adverbs that often accompany them. “He shouted,” “we whispered,” “I cried out”—none of the language that would signify vocal sound makes its way into the verbal text, so that even the aural dimensions of dialogue are all in the visuals. The narration can pause to describe an inanimate sound, as in, “Like a medium channeling lost souls, the filament of a space heater vibrated tunelessly to our footfalls” (Bechdel 2006, 39). But here, the drawing adds “zinnng” and “jinnning” and a couple of broken musical notes to evoke the distinctive sound a space heater makes when its filament heats up. The narration pauses for the elaborate metaphor which brings in the image of a trembling spirit rapper and the suggestion that ghosts could be summoned to the funeral home by the heater’s monotone hum, then brings this otherworldly image back to the realm of the body with the reference to the children’s footfalls. The space heater’s noise—zinnng, jinnng—takes shape in the physical world referenced by the drawings.

The same is true for the way the text narrates smells. The voice-over narrator provides a highly metaphorical description of what New York City smelled like to children from a small town: “In the hot August afternoon, the city was reduced, like a long-simmering demiglace, to a fragrance of stunning richness and complexity” [Figure 7]. Ironically juxtaposed with the sophisticated, savory culinary image created by the words, the picture contains word-boxes pointing to the various individual smells: “menthol” from a man’s cigarette, “diesel” from the back of a bus, “shit” from underneath a defecating dog, “putrefaction” from a garbage can, “pastry” from a bakery outside the frame of the image, “urine and electricity” from the subway, and “Brut” from a redolent passerby—one of the many clues that Fun Home’s implied reader is a baby boomer: anybody who was around in the 70s will remember exactly what that very cheap men’s cologne smelled like. The implied viewer, though, could be of any generation to take in the moment presented both verbally and visually in this image.

This narrative structure offers readers a range of perspectives along the visual axis that parallel the points of view available to prose fiction. For example, the visual point of view occupies various different positions with respect
to Alison’s avatar, usually looking directly at her, as from a third-person perspective, but sometimes looking with her at an object, as in this scene where the empty pages of the diary on her desk appear as the character sees them, occupying her subject position as one does in reading first-person narration [Figure 8]. At times the drawings can place the viewer in a position to see as if standing beside Alison, as in Figure 1. The visual point of view also presents scenes Alison’s avatar only imagines, such as the moments just before her father’s death, when he is landscaping a house while Alison is away at college, or the scenes of her father’s military service and her parents’ early marriage. And, most significantly, the embedded looker can see details in the represented world that carry thematic significances that would elude prose narration. These include visualized metaphors like the illustration of her father’s “Passion” for the historic restoration of their home (drawn in the unmistakable posture of Christ carrying the cross) and the parallel image much later in the book of the cockatoo shaped like a phoenix on the wall of her father’s library, juxtaposed with the image of her mother reading aloud after his death from Wallace Stevens’s “Sunday Morning” and the narrator’s comment that “it’s about the crucifixion” (Bechdel 2006, 836 [Figures 9 and 10]). This allows for a form of scenic rhyming that has not been accounted for in narrative-theoretical models.

In this essay I have only begun to enumerate ways in which the new genre of graphic memoir stretches narratological understanding of how storytelling works. *Fun Home* is only one among dozens of sophisticated examples of contemporary autography—works by Art Spiegelman, Lynda Barry, and David Beauchard come immediately to mind—as well as other forms of non-fictional graphic narrative like Will Eisner’s *The Plot: The Secret Story of the Elders of Zion* (2005) or Joe Sacco’s *Footnotes in Gaza* (2009). Further study of their structural innovations will illuminate not only future readings of the graphic texts themselves, but also open up new vistas for narrative theory.

Notes

1 Jared Gardner (2008), Julia Watson (2008) and others employ the term “autographics” as coined by Gillian Whitlock (2006) and used by Whitlock and Anna Poletti. Nancy K. Miller (2007) surveys other current terms for the genre, including Lynda Barry’s whimsical “autobifictionalography” (539).

2 Here and elsewhere in my essay I quote from Bechdel’s lecture notes, which she loaned me for this project.

3 The definitions Genette (1982) proposed for these terms have been widely adopted among narratologists through the current, “post-classical” phase of narrative theory.

4 Contextual approaches to narrative—such as rhetorical, feminist and queer, ethnic and post-colonial, and anti-mimetic narrative theories—are exemplified by the
essays collected in Richardson and in Phelan and Rabinowitz, as well as the forthcoming MLA Approaches to Teaching Narrative Theory, Phelan and Rabinowitz, eds.

5 McCloud is not the only theorist of comics who does not attend to gender or sexuality in his universalizing descriptions of the poetics of the genre. Except for Chute’s, the leading models for analyzing comic structure including Baetens’s, Carrier’s, Groensteen’s, Hatfield’s, and Hüning’s are as gender-blind as classical structuralist narratology.

6 Asked about the authenticity claim she attached to the cockatoo painting, Bechdel admitted that the original painting did not show the cockatoo in the phoenix-cross pose and that it was on another wall of the library from the one in her drawing. See Hatfield’s chapter on “The Problem of Authenticity in Autobiographical Comics” in Alternative Comics, 108-127.

Works Cited


Rohy, Valerie. 2010. “In the Queer Archive: Fun Home.” *GLQ* 16:3 (Summer) [forthcoming].
NOT ONLY WERE WE INERTS, WE WERE INVERSIONS OF ONE ANOTHER.

WHILE I WAS TRYING TO COMPENSATE FOR SOMETHING UNMANLY IN HIM...

WHY CAN'T I WEAR MY SNEAKERS?

IT'S A WEDDING! I WISH WE HAD SOME SORT OF STRAW HAT FOR YOU.

...HE WAS ATTEMPTING TO EXPRESS SOMETHING FEMININE THROUGH ME.

VELVET!

LEAST GIRLY DRESS IN THE STORE.

YOU'RE GOING TO UPSTAGE THE BRIDE IN THAT SUIT.

It was in that tremulous state that I determined to tell my parents, keeping it from them had started to seem ludicrous anyway.

OUT OF THE CLOSETS & INTO THE STREETS

Maurice-Foster
The Gay Report

HOMOSEXUALITIES

Muncher
Ourselves, Yourselves

WHAT ARE YOU READING? ANYTHING GOOD?

Uh... not really.
-- AND IF A WINDOW FRAME HAS PASSED BEYOND OUR PERIPHERAL VISION --

-- IT USUALLY MEANS WE'RE THROUGH IT.

Figure 3

Figure 4

Figure 5

IN MY Earliest Memories, Dad Is a Lowering, Malevolent Presence.
My father once nearly gave me to blow with a female dinner guest about whether a particular patch of embroidery was Fuchsia or Magenta.

But the infinite gradations of color in a fine sunset—from Salmon to Canary to Midnight Blue—left him wordless.

Roy took us for a walk while Dad went up to the apartment. In the hot August afternoon, the city was reduced, like a long-simmering demiglace, to a fragrance of stunning richness and complexity.
A SYMBOL OF SELF-RELIANCE? AT ANY RATE, IT SEEMED LIKE SOMETHING A LESBIAN WOULD HAVE.

"SPARTAN" MODEL

OPENING IT BACK IN MY ROOM, I ACCIDENTALLY CUT MY FINGER.

FACT.

I SMEARED THE BLOOD INTO MY JOURNAL, PLEASED BY THE OPPORTUNITY TO TRANSMIT MY ANGUISH TO THE PAGE SO LITERALLY.

Thursday 21 February

Bizarre letter from Mary today. She-entailing sentence stands out: "I still hurt from old injuries. I have had to deal with this problem in another form that almost seemed like a catastrophe. Do you know what I am talking about?" "No! I don't! What the hell's going on?"

It was his passion, and I mean passion in every sense of the word.

LIBIDINAL, MANIC, MARTYRED.
Figure 10

IT'S ABOUT THE CRUCIFIXION.

"...AND THE GREEN FREEDOM OF A COCKATOO UPON A RUG MINGLE TO DISSIPATE THE HOLY HUSH OF ANCIENT SACRIFICE."

(HO! HONEST TO GOD, WE HAD A PAINTING OF A COCKATOO IN THE LIBRARY.)