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Drag as metaphor and the quest for meaning in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*¹

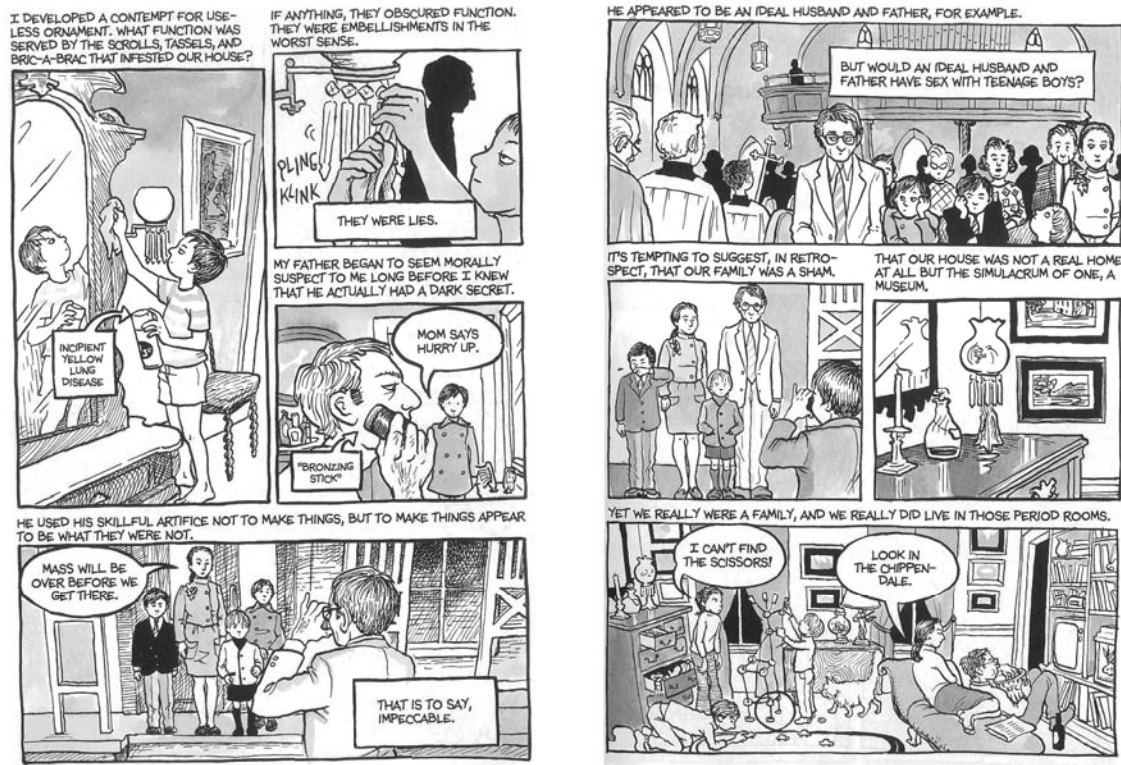
Hélène Tison

Université François Rabelais, Tours

Drag as a metaphor for role-playing, concealment, parody, disguise, etc. as well as in its queer theory sense, is a tempting point of entry into Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler's analyzes drag not as simple gender imitation, a parody of an original; in fact, it parodies and exposes the very notion of an original. Drag reveals gender itself to be a corporeal style, and a copy of a copy. The "giddiness" of drag comes from this destabilizing of what is generally perceived as "natural" and unquestionable.²

Fun Home can be described as a quest for the dead father, in which the issue of his concealed homosexuality plays a central part. In my reading of this complex graphic novel, drag will enable me to discuss the (constantly intertwined) different worlds, levels of meaning, etc. of the book, and to see how role-playing and the question of the original inform and illuminate the quest for the father, for meaning, for truth, which is centered around one main question / conviction: his death was not accidental, it was a concealed suicide.

The tremendous secret of Bruce's homosexuality, which is disclosed to Alison only after she herself comes out to her parents (in a letter written from college even before she has her first actual sexual experience) and just a few months before Bruce dies, is, on the contrary, spelled out very early on for the reader, in a blunt inscription within a panel that shows the family at church: "But would an ideal husband and father have sex with teenage boys?" (17)



In Alison’s account of her youth, when Bruce’s persona as “ideal husband and father” is still not open to questioning, his family and home are represented largely as drag accessories, enabling him to embody the role, as in the transition between the panel at church and the one immediately preceding it, where his wife and children pose on the porch while he photographs them: “He used his skilful artifice not to make things, but to make things appear to be what they were not. [...] That is to say, impeccable.” (16) They are the disguise and the alibi with which he covers up his clandestine affairs.

As we learn later, his double life began even before his marriage to Helen (the narrator suggests that the semi-professional actress was the ideal object of Bruce’s played-out desire: like Dorian Gray’s Sybil, she can embody multiple heroines without ever being herself, or real). There are few details concerning Bruce’s concealed affairs, and the revelation of his first same-sex experience is blurred by its dual retelling to Alison at an interval of a few weeks, first by her mother, who claims he was molested at fourteen (58), then by Bruce himself, who describes the same episode as pleasant (220).

Chapter One, entitled “Old father, old artificer”³ focuses on the house as décor for the family tableau (or “still life” page 13), and describes the father’s constant and obsessive preoccupation with the object thanks to which he expresses his many talents. Alison appears to feel nothing but hostility toward the “family home,”⁴ with which she feels she is constantly competing, in and for which she feels used and abused. Its unique and artificial appearance is a burden for Alison, all the more so as it contributes to making the family stand apart. Bruce is devoted to the house and is constantly engaged in improving what the narrator presents alternately as a set intended to “conceal” his “self-loathing” (20) and as a labyrinth in which this (occasional) “Minotaur” (21) has trapped his family, “and from which, as stray youths and maidens discovered to their peril, escape was impossible” (17).

Though Bruce plays the part of the “ideal husband and father,” it is obvious that he is also, or mainly, played or done by gender and gender role-playing. He is cast and maintained in the role of the heterosexual man and father, which is the only one he knows, the only one that exists in his world; it is the “original” he aspires to imitate to perfection. The role-playing is neither parodic nor pleasurable. Not playing the part would be dangerous, at best a sort of “non-life” —just as the suggestion by the narrator that he might have lived his life differently leaves her facing nothingness, a void (97).

Bruce’s ambiguous position, as actor and victim of the role-playing, results not only in his compulsive endeavor to control and dominate the world he has created / in which he is made to live, but also in his playing the parts he has taken on to excess. Excess characterizes a number of things in *Fun Home*, among which three stand out: letter-writing, book-reading, and home improvement. Bruce’s excesses are most obvious in his “libidinal[,] manic[,] martyred” (7) restoration of the house: “over the next eighteen years, my father would restore the house to its **original** condition, **and then some**” (9). His relationship to the house epitomizes the quest for the original, in an excessive manner. Indeed, the drag metaphor is most obvious in the over-accessorized, overdressed house. The house in family home drag exposes the “sham” (17), the role-playing; it is metonymic of the impossible quest for a gender original and destabilizes the very notion of family. The father’s oxymoronic

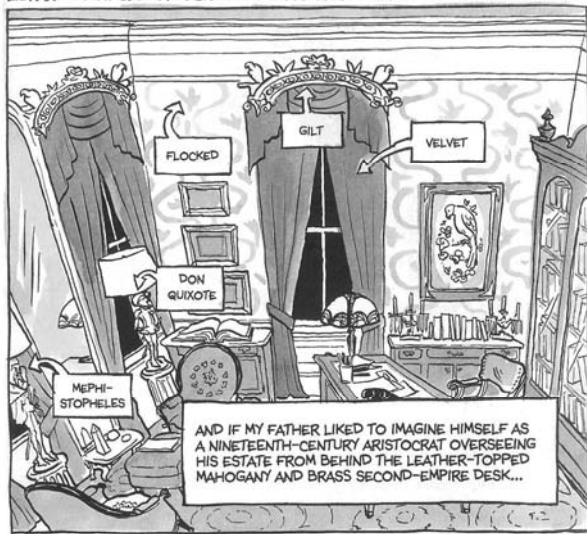
comment, “slightly perfect” (6), does not simply underline his fundamental duality, it also reveals that the ideal is unattainable.

Several letters written by young Bruce to Helen are reproduced in *Fun Home*; like the narrator, the reader is struck by their grandiloquence, their artificiality, and again by the father’s role-playing, as the influence—indeed the overwhelming presence—of Fitzgerald in their writing is underlined: “Dad’s letters to Mom, which had not been particularly demonstrative up to this point, began to **grow lush** with Fitzgeraldesque sentiment” (63). The references to the creator of *Gatsby* reveal Bruce’s contradictory views and desires: he is stunned by the similarities between the author’s and his character’s destructive lifestyles, yet yearns to undergo similar experiences. In these letters what is unveiled is not so much the desire to seduce Helen as the necessity to convince himself that this role has to be played out; he is, indeed, “seducing” himself, leading himself away from his other, undoubtedly stronger desires.

The immersion in literature is constantly linked to the confusion, or superimposition, of reality and fiction in the Bechdelian world. On the very first page, Bruce is distracted from reading the story of the adulterous suicide *Anna Karenina* by his daughter who wants to play airplane⁵; the apparently benign presence of the novel is a proleptic allusion to the revelations that follow. Bruce, as has been said, identifies both with Fitzgerald and his characters; he draws from them in his courting of Helen, and again later on to seduce his young male lovers, notably students to whom he teaches literature.

The proliferation and ubiquity of books is regularly underlined, as in the passages set in the father’s library. Four pages in Chapter Three (61-63) revolve around some of the uses the father makes of literature. The passage begins by a description of the room, concluded by the statement that “The library was a fantasy, but a fully operational one” (61).

FOR ANYONE BUT THE LANDED GENTRY TO REFER TO A ROOM IN THEIR HOUSE AS "THE LIBRARY" MIGHT SEEM AFFECTED. BUT THERE REALLY WAS NO OTHER WORD FOR IT.



...DID THAT REQUIRE SUCH A LEAP OF THE IMAGINATION? PERHAPS AFFECTATION CAN BE SO THOROUGHGOING, SO AUTHENTIC IN ITS DETAILS, THAT IT STOPS BEING PRETENSE...



THE LIBRARY WAS A FANTASY, BUT A FULLY OPERATIONAL ONE.



VISITORS ALWAYS ASKED THE SAME QUESTION ABOUT THE MASSIVE WALNUT BOOKCASE.



PART OF DAD'S COUNTRY SQUIRE ROUTINE INVOLVED EDIFYING THE VILLAGERS—HIS MORE PROMISING HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS.

THE PROMISE WAS VERY LIKELY SEXUAL IN SOME CASES, BUT WHATEVER ELSE MIGHT HAVE BEEN GOING ON, BOOKS WERE BEING READ.



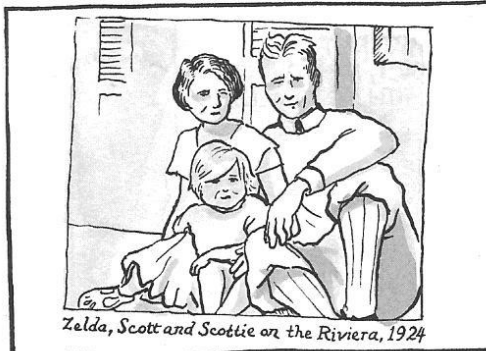
We then see Roy returning *The Sun Also Rises* and being given *The Great Gatsby*, with the narrator alluding to the sexual nature of the exchange. The next pages are those in which Bruce's "Fitzgeraldesque" letters to Helen are written. In his courting of both Helen and Roy, books play strikingly central and multiple parts: alibi, means of seduction, coded language. The (gender) confusion and role-playing are highlighted by the transitions from the description of the father's library to his seduction of Roy, to his letters to Helen; Fitzgerald's novels are used to reach similar and incompatible, irreconcilable ends.

When Alison and Bruce's relationship is not organized around housecleaning, it is either hindered by or achieved through books. Chapter Three closes on yet another library scene, when Alison comes to ask her father for a check to buy comics. Bruce, engrossed in a biography of Zelda Fitzgerald (with whom he indirectly identified when he claimed, in one of the letters to Helen, that he was Jonquil, page 63), does not even look at his daughter. The interplay between images and texts (the latter discuss the parallels between *Gatsby* and Bruce, with a remark on their shared

preference for fiction over reality, page 85) provides a clear message: his books, the stories he reads and rereads, are more real to him than his family⁶, even as the caption over the last panel evokes the “tenuous bond” the narrator wishes to maintain with him.

BUT IN A WAY GATSBY'S PRISTINE BOOKS AND MY FATHER'S WORN ONES SIGNIFY THE SAME THING--THE PREFERENCE OF A FICTION TO REALITY.

IF FITZGERALD'S OWN LIFE HADN'T TURNED FROM FAIRY TALE TO TRAGEDY, WOULD HIS STORIES OF DISENCHANTMENT HAVE RESONATED SO DEEPLY WITH MY FATHER?



GATSBY IN THE POOL. ZELDA IN THE ASYLUM. SCOTT IN HOLLYWOOD, AN ALCOHOLIC, DYING OF A HEART ATTACK AT FORTY-FOUR.



STRUCK BY THE COINCIDENCE, I COUNTED OUT THEIR LIFESPANS. THE SAME NUMBER OF MONTHS, THE SAME NUMBER OF WEEKS...BUT FITZGERALD LIVED THREE DAYS LONGER.



The contact with her father that Alison craved for and missed in childhood is finally established through literature, first when she becomes his student in high school, and later when she goes to college. But both modes are equally excessive: the hitherto silent father now appears unable to contain himself, overwhelms Alison with reading suggestions and analyses, so much so that she actually gives up the study of literature.⁷

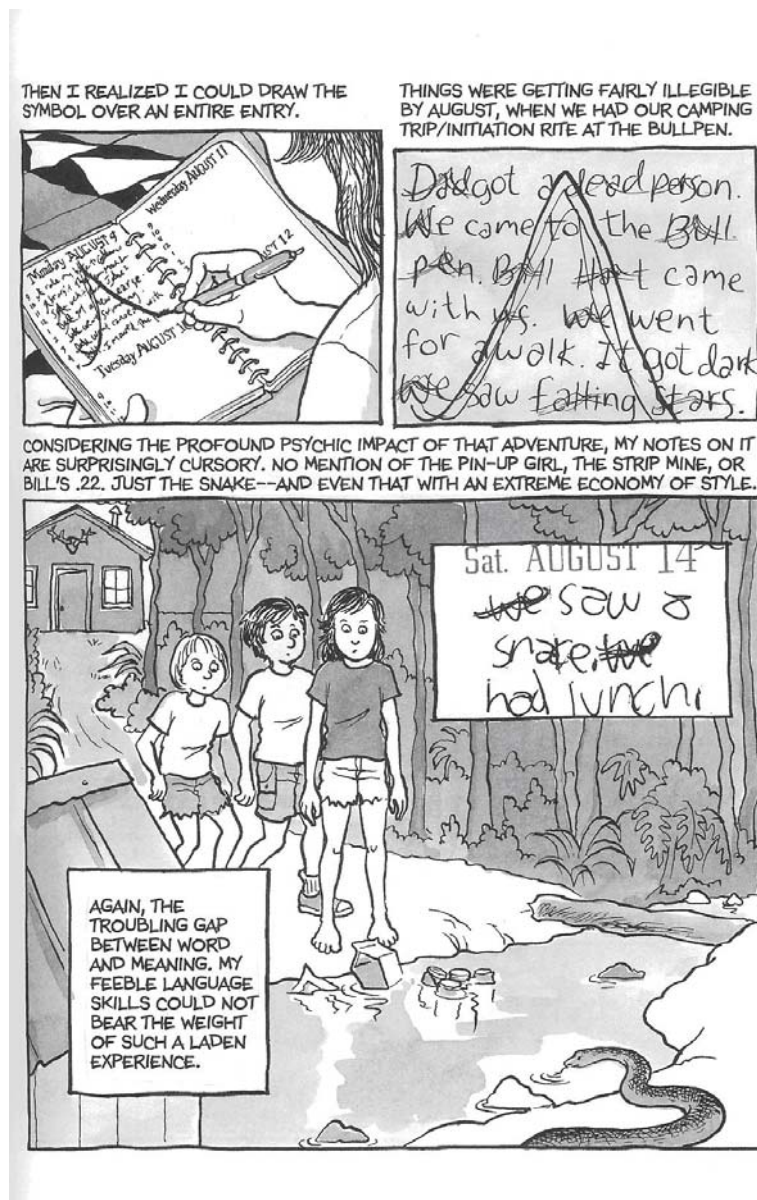
The daughter who denounces her parents' fictional excesses nevertheless reproduces them. She is wary and critical of Bruce's identification with Fitzgerald, yet takes it up, develops it and even includes her mother in it, in a revealingly far-fetched comparison with Zelda. She draws lengthy and detailed parallels with other authors: Camus, Proust, James; indeed she places the entire story under the banner of Greek mythology with the opening and sustained reference to Dedalus and Icarus. She even confesses: "My parents are most real to me in fictional terms" (67). The numerous references to fiction in her attempts to make sense of Bruce's and Helen's lives are a reformulation of the question of the original, an intertwining of reality and fiction in the quest for revelations, truth and meaning. The genre also is telling: graphic memoirs, the fictionalizing of real lives in graphic form, in a mimetic form, therefore, and one which simultaneously announces the mimetic aspiration and embodies its impossibility.

When Alison explains her first endeavor to give an account of her life, how she began to write a diary (on a calendar from one of the funeral home's vendors), one cannot help but notice that the first words, "Dad is reading" (140), are in fact written by the father. The diary is thus initially built on a gap between words and reality, on a double lie: the father impersonates his daughter and states that he is reading when he is in fact writing. No wonder, therefore, that the expression of doubt soon begins to creep up in the diary, whose every sentence is accompanied by the same notation: "I think."

Alison's doubts as to the reality of her experiences overwhelm her diary, though she only jots down simple sentences to describe mundane facts (e.g. "I made popcorn" page 141). But this can be read as an attempt, precisely, to record "reality." Is reality undecidable? Or does the problem lie with language? The expression of

doubt reveals the instability of the world, of words; the narrator talks of an “epistemological crisis.” “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)

The disclaimers, which are described as “gossamer sutures in the gaping rift between signifier and signified.” (142) become blots “in an attempt to fortify them,” and are soon replaced not by other words, but by a symbol, a circumflex, inscribed over names and personal pronouns, and which eventually crosses out entire entries.



“Circumflex” comes from the Latin “circumflexus,” a translation of the Greek “perispan” meaning to draw off, divert. The unreliability of words, of the world and of identities, threatens Alison’s sense of self, her integrity. It is very much like the

“invisible substance” (135) she sees everywhere when her obsessive compulsive disorders begin, and which has to be “gathered and dispersed constantly to keep it away from my body – to avoid in particular inhaling or swallowing it.” (136)

Fun Home both narrates the fascination with language, and denounces language as untruthful and unstable. At her father’s funeral, Alison is enraged by the banal words uttered by the mourners, which read as white lies, but dares not experiment with speaking out the truth; the fantasy is represented graphically, but never enacted (27, 125). When the father is tried, it is for “furnishing a malt beverage to a minor” while “the real accusation dared not speak its name” (175). When she writes her coming-out letter to her parents from college, Alison uses a thesaurus (77), as if she were still looking, endlessly and unsuccessfully, for words that could truthfully convey her experiences. Silence too is denounced, not only the lack of communication in the family but also the absence of a goodbye letter from the father, a void that makes the “truth” undecidable and that haunts the entire story. Words, whether absent or present, eternally fail to protect her from doubt.

Yet the quest for meaning does not call for the simple denunciation of language as unreliable or unstable, and its simplification. Like Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus, Alison has to devise a language of her own, which she finds in the complex interplay between visual and linguistic signifiers. Indeed, the link between text and image in *Fun Home* is not a redundant attempt at clarifying; it is, on the contrary, complex, multiple, changing.

Quite often, text and image seem unrelated, as when banal daily activities are represented in the panels while the captions focus on something else entirely, allowing for an oblique understanding of possible other meanings, of what lurks beneath the surface (e.g. pages 92-93). In other instances, the one denounces the lies or meaninglessness of the other—and in at least one instance the text leads the drawings “astray,” when Alison’s fantasized violent and truthful outburst concerning her father on the day of his funeral is represented, and precedes the drawing of what actually happened (125). They can also appear to contradict one another, or to contradict the narrative—as when text and image tell the story of the father’s “non-accident”: the imaginary event, the erasure of the accident, is

represented instead of the actual death, and on the same mode as the rest of the story (59).

The very structure of the narrative is sometimes built on very tenuous links between text and image; in Chapter Five, the (apparently unproblematic) transition from Alison's obsessive-compulsive disorders to her diary-writing is operated via several detours, one of which takes us back to the map previously shown (30) of the mile and a half circle encompassing the significant places in her father's life. The scene is sparked by the mother's question: troubled by her daughter's disorders, she tells her, "Alison, maybe you feel guilty about something," and asks: "Have you had bad thoughts about me or dad?" The entire passage is structured around the image of the circle—the map, but before that, the mother's revealingly circular reasoning: the suggestion that Alison has disorders because she has bad thoughts about her parents (that cause and effect are entirely "internal") is indirectly and humorously denounced and reversed by the representation of the parent's argument in the following panels—and sutured with the prefix "auto": autistic, autodidact, autocrat, autocide, autobiography (139-140).

The structure of *Fun Home* can be alternately, indeed simultaneously, described as horizontal and vertical, circular, open, exploded. The abundance of intertextual references, for instance, has a dual opening up effect as it enriches *Fun Home* and multiplies its possible readings while simultaneously inciting us to read or reread the texts that are mentioned. The trajectory can also be circular, or spiraling, when image and text focus on the same event (though always in very different fashions); when certain scenes or moments are returned to, and a different emphasis is laid on the same events. Meaning is also constructed vertically, with a superimposition of information and details, either in the same panel or page, or in the ascribing of multiple notations and connotations to the same object, as in the case of the Sunbeam Bread for instance.

The father is killed by a Sunbeam Bread truck (59); the brand name on the vehicle is rendered prominent by its duplication in a framed and bracketed comment within the panel which underlines the ironical contrast between the tragedy of the father's death and the mundane instrument that delivers it. The loaf or the brand

name appear in a number of other contexts: when the father's violent outbursts are first represented (21); when he meets an old schoolmate (31), in a scene which reveals the gap between him and those who were once his peers, while the facial expressions suggest a possible sexual innuendo; in a family scene in the kitchen (67) which focuses on the distance between the family members, their isolation and lack of communication; in a poster in a garage window, when Bruce's lack of virility is discussed and opposed to that of the mechanics (the garage, one may note, proudly advertises that it does lubrications, page 96);

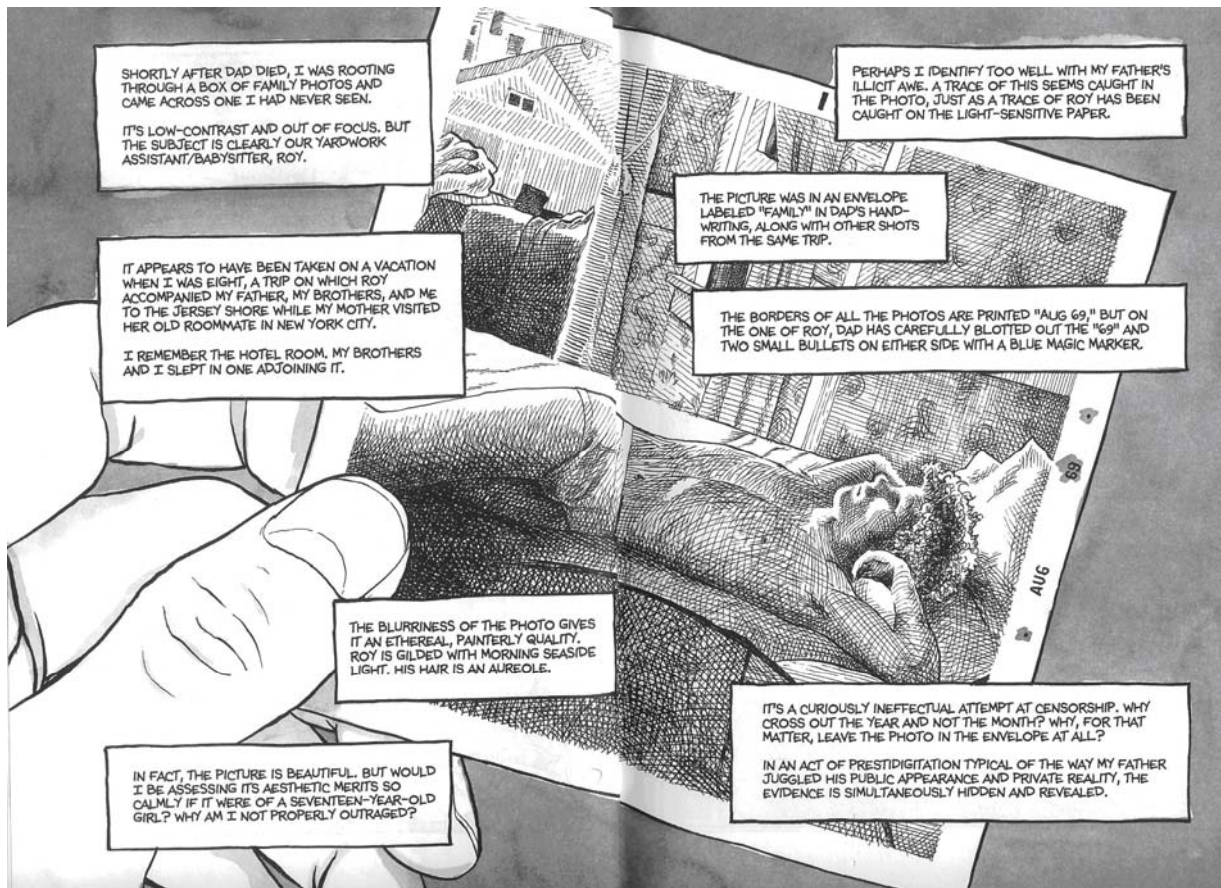


when young Alison sees her first picture of a naked woman (112); when, for the first time, Helen discusses Bruce's double life face to face with Alison (217). All those contexts establish a very strong link between Bruce's death / suicide and violence, sexuality (threatening heterosexuality in particular), lies, fiction (the family fiction mainly). Furthermore, all of these themes are niched within the narrator's own complex relation to "reality," since, as has already been said, what is represented on page 59 is not the fatal accident, but the father's non-death; not the truth of his death but the fiction of his survival.

The frequent fixity / static quality of the drawings, in the facial and bodily expressions in particular (which is undoubtedly due to the extensive use the author made of still photographs as models⁸), is at odds with the very detailed or "full"

panels, and even more so with the density and dynamics of the graphic novel as a whole, with the multiple trajectories created by the text / image interplay.

Some of the harshest reflections are inscribed not in the captions, but in the very space of the image (e.g. pages 16-17), thus destabilizing and transforming the graphic space. The photo of Roy on a hotel bed takes up two full pages (100-101).



There are no margins, and the graphic space is eaten up by text, in which the narrator describes, questions, analyses the photo and her reactions to it. Despite the absent margins, there is a *mise en abyme* of the picture: the reproduction of the blurred photograph held in the narrator's very neatly drawn hand (the contrast also suggests the desire to convince the reader of the authenticity of the document) highlights the two different times and spaces in which it appeared, its two creators, and the very different meanings it takes on and incorporates in those contexts.

The image is granted a very unique status by its oversized dimension, emphasized by the exceptional absence of margins which creates a sense of immediacy, of suddenness. The shock of the discovery and the import of the evidence are made clear, but are also in contrast with the unemotional tone, the

matter-of-factness of the text—which nevertheless betrays what it seeks to conceal (“our yardwork assistant / babysitter Roy” reveals the reluctance to admit his relationship with, and to give him up to, the father; the “adjoining” bedrooms tell of the shocking physical proximity between the various protagonists; the “family” envelope in which Alison finds it denounces the sham and confusion): as the narrator says of her father’s attempt at erasing the date on the photograph, “the evidence is simultaneously hidden and revealed.”

The quest is not achieved by the stripping bare of Bruce in father drag which would only give way either to a different but no more truthful story—despite the role-playing and lies, the narrator asserts, “we really were a family, and we really did live in those period rooms.” (17)—or, as has been said, a void. The process by which “truth” is attained rather calls for a multiplying of details, providing layer upon layer of information, which are placed in (often violently) dynamic relation with each other. The central question of the suicide / accident is never solved, nor does it need to be; its very ambiguity does not require to be cleared up and cancelled out as in a detective novel. The evidence of the suicide is flimsy, but it is weighty evidence to a different kind of revelation, that of the enduring though “tenuous bond” (85) between father and daughter. The fireworks of signifiers (like the father’s excesses) counter the apparent and misleading univocity, or even duality, of language, of verbal accounts. In *Fun Home*, as in drag, the accumulation of signifiers clears the way to an understanding of other, of different meanings and truths.

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NOTES

¹ Page references are to the original Houghton Mifflin edition; for the French Denoël edition add 4 pages.

² Butler, 186-188

³ This is a quote from the very end of James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*:

26 April: Mother is putting my new secondhand clothes in order. She prays now, she says, that I may learn in my own life and away from home and friends what the heart is and what it feels. So be it. Welcome, O life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race.

27 April: Old father, old artificer, stand me now and ever in good stead. (228)

⁴ This is not the Fun Home of the title – that, in fact, is the nickname of the family-run funeral home...

⁵ The distraction is only momentary.

⁶ The constant links, tensions and contradictions between fiction, sexuality, and family are highlighted in a parallel scene in the same chapter when Bruce who is chatting with Roy in the library forgets the son he was meant to pick up (65).

⁷ Though Joyce eventually catches up with her, and she borrows her father's edition of *Ulysses*.

⁸ Alison Bechdel explains her drawing process in a video entitled "OCD" (short for "obsessive-compulsive disorder") posted on YouTube:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_CBdhxVFEGc>

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