A 'Stain on Silence': The Registration of Trauma in the Comics Memoirs of
Alison Bechdel and Art Spiegelman

By

Sarah Richardson

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Abstract

The value of comics as a medium for serious literary expression, despite growing popularity and recognition, is still contested. Two of the most successful examples of the medium, Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986 & 1992) and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006), use differing and similar strategies to narrate the transmission of trauma from parent to child. *Maus* records the testimony of Spiegelman's survivor father's experiences in hiding in Poland and in Auschwitz and Dachau, as well as the process of this testimony and the conflicted relationship between father and son. *Fun Home*'s traumatic history centres on Bechdel's artistically ambitious father's closeted affairs with teenage boys, and his overbearing influence on her own artistry and queer sexuality. This thesis tracks the narrative and graphic registration of trauma in these two memoirs, through their use of archival materials, consideration of the ethical problems of the representation of extremity and history, and treatment of narrative time.

Introduction

There is such a vanity in each succeeding generation – we think we can free our parents from expectation, that we will be their talking cure, that we are the catharsis they need.

- Zadie Smith, “Accidental Hero”

Art Spiegelman and Alison Bechdel’s autobiographical avatars both seek Zadie Smith’s elusive and ultimately impossible catharsis in their comics memoirs, *Maus* (1986 & 1992) and *Fun Home* (2006). Spiegelman’s parents were survivors of Auschwitz and Dachau; Bruce Bechdel had extramarital affairs with teenage boys, and died, in a possible suicide, when his eldest daughter was nineteen. During their childhoods, Alison and Artie’s parents both inflicted trauma on their respective children, and transmitted the suffering that they had lived through (and, in the case of Artie’s mother, failed to survive). The attempt to resolve – or at least uncover and interrogate – one’s parents’ pain is in fact an oblique method of processing one’s own trauma. Bechdel and Spiegelman explore their complicated inheritances and the complexities of constructing narrative histories of personal suffering and family in these two comics memoirs.

Comics currently occupy an odd, liminal place in the cultural sphere. They are no longer underground and yet they do not quite fit into the mainstream. Long-form, literary comics are reviewed in a wide variety of publications and stocked in many larger or independent bookshops. Auto/biographical and memoir comics have enjoyed a relatively high level of popularity and success, particularly in ‘elite’ cultural realms, in recent years. *Maus* remains one of the most widely read literary comics, particularly outside the sphere of serious comics aficionados. *Fun Home* was universally acclaimed upon its release, its mainstream success confirmed by its winning *Time*’s Book of the Year 2006. Comics regularly receive literary awards and are the subject of a burgeoning field of academic research. However, anecdotally at least, it seems that most English-language readers, even enthusiasts with catholic taste, do not regularly read comics. Comics are not widely perceived to have the same literary value as novels, and have not yet reached a stable or secure position in the cultural canon. The fact that

discussion of the cultural role that comics hold is still a commonplace in most commentary on comics, both in academia and journalism, indicates that the cultural value of comics, in spite of receiving major prizes and serious critical attention, remains in contest.

Various publications and texts on comics are anxious to prove the medium's worth, despite its traditional associations with mass consumerism, childhood, puerility and disposability. Rocco Versaci's *This Book Contains Graphic Language: Comics as Literature* is a premier example of this kind of zealous and mildly insecure tone. Versaci begins his book by noting others' disdain for his comic reading habits and declaring "why would a seemingly well-adjusted adult have so many comic books? In many ways, this entire book is an attempt to answer this question" (2). Charles McGrath's 2004 *New York Times Magazine* article 'Not Funnies', takes an outsider perspective on comics and thus adopts a tone of amused surprise and slight bafflement at the apparent quality of serious comics. The piece is a general overview of the (white heterosexual male) literary comics scene, and McGrath begins by making the loaded and somewhat backhanded claim that

it's not too soon to wonder what the next new thing, the new literary form might be. It might be comic books. Seriously. Comics are what novels used to be – an accessible, vernacular form with mass appeal – and if the highbrows are right, they're a form perfectly suited to our dumbed-down culture and collective attention deficit.

Despite McGrath's ultimate endorsement of literary comics, this kind of bemusement from those who are not serious aficionados and artists is perhaps the reason for the note of territorial bitterness in the Chris Ware-edited comics edition of *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*. In his introduction, Ware uses his insider perspective as one of the most acclaimed contemporary serious comics artists to demonstrate a sense of frustration at the lack of understanding of this medium from the outside world. He laments that

comics are the only art form that many "normal" people still arrive at expecting a specific emotional reaction (laughter) or a specific content (superheroes).... drawing comics demands an incredible amount of time and devotion from the creator, a willingness to put up with being not only misunderstood, but possibly disregarded – not to mention an understanding of so many different disciplines – that it ends up not being a terribly inviting or rewarding field (11).

He displays an adolescent irritation at the narrow-minded conformity of “normal people,” spending much of the article complaining about the difficulty and isolation of professional cartooning. The tone of many of the selected works in this issue of *McSweeney’s* follows suite, as single heterosexual white male ‘nerds’ bemoan their dissociation from sexually unavailable women and a world disdainful of their love for amassing obscure and obsessive collections of jazz, comics and pornography, in the contributions of Joe Matt, Robert Crumb, Jeffrey Brown, Adrian Tomine, and several of Ware’s broadsheet-cum-dust jacket strips.

In a more positive light, this outsider ‘edginess’ allows for a more avant-garde approach to take place in many successful comics, as authors take advantage of the possibilities that the form may hold. McCloud has described narrative time in comics as being particular to its medium, that “comics is the only form in which past, present, and future are visible simultaneously... You’re looking at panels, which, if you’re reading panel two on page two, then to its left is the past, and to its right is the future. And your perception of the present moves across it” (Chute 2007). This quality lends history and auto/biography comics a particularly acute sense of the passing of time. The traumatized have a non-conventional perception of time, and so the possibilities for representing an individual’s experience of trauma are particularly rich in comics.

The generic embarrassment associated with comics as a marginal, infantilised genre is not itself addressed by Spiegelman or Bechdel in these particular texts¹, but shame of a different, more personal order forms a central part of the fabric of their remembrances. Daniel Worden describes the “public nature of shame, as a function of the hidden, secret, or closeted brought into the open.” Artie feels shame when his father expresses his racism and miserliness; Alison is both ashamed by and drawn to her father’s transgressions, most particularly in their public manifestations of his court trial, his Victorian interior decoration and the archival documentation of his desire. Shame is most strongly addressed in *Fun Home*, but Art’s shame at his aggressive inducement of his father’s testimony and at his father’s racism is an important feature of *Maus*. The interposition of embarrassment-related humour and banal domestic griping in *Maus* complicates the apparent pathos and guilt of living with a survivor. Bechdel emphasizes the personal aspect: the story of a family with traumatic memories and serious

¹ With regard to their subject matter, the marginalization of nerd culture pales laughably in comparison to the millennia of violent oppression to which Jews and homosexuals have been subjected.

transgressions is related with humour and self-deprecation. Furthermore, Spiegelman and Bechdel use a genre that has been traditionally associated with childhood and immaturity to address their own traumatic childhoods. They use the language of comics to articulate the unspoken histories that informed every aspect of their family lives and childhoods: the secret of Bruce Bechdel's sexuality and philandering, and the Spiegelmans' traumatic past which is not fully disclosed until the process of writing *Maus* is begun.

Comics are a relatively recent tradition, usually traced back to Rodolphe Töpffer's humorous illustrated stories using a panel format, published between 1833 and 1846 and favoured by Goethe. Spiegelman was a part of the American countercultural underground comics scene in the 1970s, producing comics that went against the Comics Code Authority's limitations and included explicit sex, violence and drug use. It is this movement and its formal and content-related advancements that spawned the contemporary comics of the last thirty years. Autobiographical comics began appearing during this period, notably Harvey Pekar's *American Splendor* (1976-2009), a series of collaborative comics which detail Pekar's daily life in Cleveland. Despite the tradition's relative youth, its preeminent authors have drawn on a wide range of literary and artistic sources to create works of great complexity and sophistication, referring to and riffing on antecedents that have achieved canonical status, not just within the comics tradition, but as serious literature, within decades. Bechdel and Spiegelman engage with a complex range of artistic and literary history, their books making heavy use of references and intertexts. *Maus* is an antecedent to *Fun Home* in the way that it approaches memory and the pain of history. One of *Maus*' confessional precursors is Justin Green's 1972 *Binky Brown and the Holy Virgin Mary*, the first autobiographical long-form comic. *Maus* and *Fun Home* both deal with the transmission of trauma and with more subtle parent-child inheritances. Bechdel has cited *Maus* as an influence.

I couldn't have done anything without *Maus* either, of course. No one had addressed anything serious in comics before then. When I was trying to come up with the format for the book, I said, I'll just make it the same size as *Maus* – so it's exactly the same size as *Maus*. And I also loved Spiegelman's chapters' divisions. That inspired my own chapter structure. [... *Maus* and *Fun Home*...] are both self-aware about the process of examining your relationship with your father. Again, that's something so fundamentally influential that I don't even see it. (Chute 'Interview').

The passing on of trauma is a central theme in both memoirs. This transmission has variously been described as “black milk” (Levine 82), signifying the tainting of consciousness by pain at its source within a family, and, in Marianne Hirsch’s phrase, post-memory. Post-memory is differentiated from memory as “that of the child of the survivor whose life is dominated by memories of what preceded his/her birth” (8). According to this definition, the term is not applicable to Bechdel’s experience, both because she is not a child of a survivor of the Holocaust, and because the memories that inform her psychic experience occur throughout her childhood as well as before her birth. However, both Bechdel and Spiegelman experience suffering that is informed by their parents’ histories. It is the *transmission* of trauma that is key here, rather than a first-hand experience of trauma such as physical or sexual abuse (although emotional neglect is certainly at play in both childhoods). The articulation of these unspoken histories is a movement away from this transmitted trauma. These texts could be read as a means of gaining distance from a damaging past and controlling its traumatic legacy by articulating the source of the trauma. But it is simplistic to read these memoirs as therapy, a point to which I will later return. Both texts are conscious of the relation of art to personal, familial and collective trauma, and both articulate how the transmission of trauma works. But there is resistance to the substitution of such healing purpose at the expense of art. *Fun Home* especially refers continually to aestheticist kinds and exemplars of art-making and artists, as if to hold the purposive and therapeutic views of art at a distance.

‘Black milk’, coined by Paul Celan in his poem ‘Deathsfugue’ and adapted by Louise Kaplan, is a way of describing how

a survivor’s child may be said to suckle the noxious nourishment of trauma. Such a child... “relishes and absorbs this ‘black milk,’ cultivates its bitter taste as if it were vital sustenance – as it if were existence itself” (224). In this article Kaplan discusses the notion of “transposition” first introduced by Judith Kestenberg to describe the psychological process of unconscious cross-generational transmission of trauma, noting that until the late 1970s therapists had regularly misdiagnosed the children of Holocaust survivors because their symptoms were often no different from those of other [survivor] patients (Levine 82-83).

Spiegelman and Bechdel’s received trauma is indeed cultivated beyond their childhoods and into their adult life. In ‘Prisoner on the Hell Planet’, Spiegelman’s narration describes his

dismissal, shortly before her suicide, of his mother's plea for reassurance, "resentful of the way she tightened the umbilical cord" (103). The umbilical cord represents not only ordinary filial ties, but also the way in which Anja Spiegelman's depression and pain make demands on and are passed onto her son. Bechdel's reading of transmitted trauma is more positive. She recognizes the pain that endures as a result of her father's death, secrets, and "lowering, malevolent presence" (197), but changes direction over the course of the memoir to focus on the beneficial aspects of her inheritance from her father.

Trauma theory, particularly the seminal works of Cathy Caruth and Dori Laub, has been particularly pertinent to the reading of these two texts. However, this critical paradigm has not been unchallenged, and one more extreme (and critiqued) tendency has been towards dwelling on the 'impossibility' of representation and mystification. Rüdiger Kunow has noted that "a self-reflexive awareness of the limits of representation has become not only a specific problem germane to the Holocaust but more generally a *condition sine qua non* of all representations in theory, history and cultural texts" (252). This awareness is not only apparent in most of the critical discussion of *Maus* and *Fun Home*, but is a deeply entrenched element in the texts themselves. Bechdel's narration and the testimonial narrative in *Maus* are profoundly concerned with what of the past it is possible to express.

Frances Guerin and Roger Hallas have characterised this line of thought, saying "Trauma studies consistently return to an iconoclastic notion of the traumatic event as that which simultaneously demands urgent representation but shatters all potential frames of comprehension and reference" (3). Again, this is a fairly apt description of what occurs in *Maus* and *Fun Home*. It is when critics move past this iconoclastic characterisation to suggest that testimony is simultaneously possible and impossible that one moves into the realm of obfuscation. Caruth, one of the proponents of 'impossibility,' discussing Laub's work with interviewing survivors, states "The traumatized, we might say, carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess" (5). She goes on to argue that:

The trauma is a repeated suffering of the event, but it is also a continual leaving of its site. The traumatic reexperiencing of the event thus *carries with it* what Dori Laub calls the "collapse of witnessing," the impossibility of knowing that first constituted it. And by carrying that impossibility of knowing out of the empirical event itself, trauma

opens up and challenges us to a new kind of listening, the witnessing, precisely, *of impossibility*" (10).

This sense of impossibility is not to be dismissed entirely; it is certainly something that testifiers express themselves. However, it does mystify the traumatic event, moving towards a rhetorical end point which effectively occludes further enquiry. Susannah Radstone summarises critical discourse on the subject thus:

Debates concerning testimony's 'impossibility' concern themselves... with the impossibility of containing and communicating to others that which has been experienced or witnessed by the testifier. Theories of testimony's impossibility link it not to the impossibility of complete self-knowledge, but to the impossibility of communicating – even to the self, sometimes – an experience of an event. Epistemological doubt shifts, then, from the arena of self-knowledge, to that of 'events' and the central question posed by testimony concerns whether any meaningful sense can be made and communicated of traumatic experience. Whereas confession's 'impossibilities' are primarily associated with the tensions of intra-subjectivity, testimony's impossibilities are linked with the struggles of inter-subjectivity. Theories of testimony dwell on the difficulties attendant upon transforming the registration of significant events of suffering or shock into meaningful experience that can be communicated to others (175).

This is, of course, a subjective area, but I would argue that the sophistication, complexity and depth of texts such as *Maus* and *Fun Home*, among many other records of traumatic experience, do convert suffering into communicable "meaningful experience." Perfect communication of the fullness of any event is always questionable, and testimony does provide a test limits case. But the body of work that testifies to traumatic events does suggest that some sense can be made out of that experience.

Sara R. Horowitz's *Voicing the Void*, in many ways an excellent text, approaches the problem of representation of extremity and leans towards the 'impossible' end of the spectrum. She cites Artie's concerns about writing *Maus* in 'Auschwitz (Time Flies)' as an example of an opinion on the "dangers" of Holocaust fiction, which is why I include the following quotation on fiction. Her categorisation of *Maus* as fictional (she does not justify this decision, but one can assume

that it is because the book is a comic) demonstrates how limited the range of non-‘dangerous’ representations may be:

Taken to its extreme, fictional representation of the Holocaust appears to some readers to make a fetish of language. Unlike a bare chronology, which aspires to the facts as such, the literary text – in avowing its own artifice, rhetoricity, and contingent symbol-making – threatens to shift and ultimately destroy the grounds by which one measures one set of truth claims or one historical interpretation against another. This fear is expressed perhaps most pressingly by critics of postmodernism, who fear, like David Hirsch, that its “radically skeptical mindset” (24) and its focus on language games and *jouissance* finally efface historical distinctions, precluding ethical thinking (20).

In the case of *Maus* and *Fun Home* the reader is encouraged to uncritically believe the historical events reported in the narrative, although both authors do question the reliability of memory and the inevitable bias and elision that the construction of any narrative involves. A lot of criticism around Holocaust narratives and the larger issue of historical fiction or historical narrative deliberately blindfolds itself to actual reading practices. Readers are not so unsophisticated or historically unaware that they would read a fictional novel about the Holocaust and think that because it is a fiction, the Holocaust did not happen. Obviously the place of ‘truth’ and facticity in historical narratives is fraught but every narrative is necessarily constructed and mediated. Testimonies in particular are subject to the ravages of memory, and the subjectivity of one narrator. A timeline is not more ‘pure’ than a fleshed out narrative text. All narratives exclude information in order to craft a comprehensible series of events and avoid chaos. Lack of detail does not ensure a less compromised, more authentic historical record. The ‘impossibility’ trope invents a false dichotomy between the “bare chronology” and the detailed account which employs novelistic techniques, fictional or otherwise. These supposed opposites are differing modes of the same narrative approach to history.

Dominick LaCapra offers a potential resolution (or movement towards a resolution) in his suggestion of an ‘ethic of response’:

the problematics of trauma should not lead one to mystify problems or to discount the work of both memory and reconstruction with respect to limit-events. There is much that can be reconstructed and remembered with respect to the Holocaust and other historical “catastrophes,” and the challenge is not to dwell obsessively on trauma as an

unclaimed experience that occasions the paradoxical witnessing of the breakdown of witnessing but rather to elaborate a mutually informative, critically questioning relation between memory and reconstruction that keeps one sensitive to the problematics of trauma (1998 183).

I view many of the basic tenets of 'trauma theory' to be valuable, and I have applied them throughout this thesis. However, I am suspicious of claims of the Holocaust being outside of history, or the desirability of silence. This question is discussed at length in chapter two, 'Confessive Narratives: Shame, Testimony and the Limits of Redemption'.

Part of the distaste around representations of the Holocaust is the concern that "a memory evoked too often, and expressed in the form of a story, tends to become fixed in a stereotype, in a form tested by experience, crystallized, perfected, adorned, installing itself in the place of the raw memory and growing at its expense" (Levi 24). All narratives and all language necessarily limit and close off possibilities in order to create something that is coherent and comprehensible. Some critics of representational narrative fear that any unavoidably limited narrative which gains cultural value and popular awareness will become the only record of the events, divorced from the original, authentic experience. There is here a moral fear of contamination, beyond repugnance at the possibility of voyeurism: an incomplete or inadequate narrative will sully and misrepresent the scale of suffering that occurred. Silence is a mystifying gesture, preventing further investigation into the implications and context of the Holocaust. Elie Wiesel definitively articulates this fearful mode of thought in his damning critique of the 1978 television miniseries *Holocaust*, stating,

Auschwitz cannot be explained nor can it be visualized. Whether culmination or aberration of history, the Holocaust transcends history. Everything about it inspires fear and leads to despair: The dead are in possession of a secret that we, the living, are neither worthy of nor capable of recovering.... The Holocaust? The ultimate end, the ultimate mystery, never to be comprehended or transmitted. Only those who were there will know what it was; the others will never know.

In some ways, this is correct. Those who are not survivors cannot expect to fully understand the suffering of one who entered a concentration camp. Yet this characterisation as "the ultimate end, the ultimate mystery" is stifling. Trite linear narratives which deal in didacticism, attempt to conveniently cram the entire experience of millions over a fifteen year period into

the lives of a few, and force a sentimentalised meaning or 'message' onto the Holocaust are obviously undesirable². But to suggest that none of these atrocities may be depicted and that the events of the Shoah are outside the realm of human history is not the only or best way to express respect for its victims. However, Wiesel is not suggesting that total silence is the answer. He has written many books about his experience in the Holocaust. In his 2006 preface to *Night* he states "For the survivor who chooses to testify, it is clear: his duty is to bear witness for the dead *and* for the living. He has no right to deprive future generations of a past that belongs to our collective memory. To forget would not only be dangerous but offensive; to forget the dead would be akin to killing them a second time" (xv). Wiesel advocates a response in which only survivors merely present, rather than interpret their experiences. His positions seem contradictory. If 'the Holocaust' cannot be comprehended or transmitted, then what is the purpose of bearing witness? Furthermore, any representation necessarily involves interpretation: narratorial perspectives are subjective and limited. Simple presentation is unachievable outside of its rhetorical imagining. Retaining a critical perspective of the narration of extreme suffering rather than resorting to damning or elevating texts according to a highly subjective set of obscure criteria is important.

In *The Drowned and the Saved*, that other great chronicler of survival, Primo Levi, rails against this discourse of impossibility of expression and mystification.

I never liked the term *incommunicability*, so fashionable during the 1970s, first of all because it is a linguistic horror and secondly for more personal reasons.... According to a theory fashionable during those years, which to me seems frivolous and irritating, "incommunicability" supposedly was an inevitable ingredient, a life sentence inherent to the human condition, particularly the life style of industrial society: we are monads, incapable of reciprocal messages, or capable only of truncated messages, false at their departure, misunderstood on their arrival. Discourse is fictitious, pure noise, a painted veil that conceals existential silence; we are alone, even (or especially) if we live in pairs. It seems to me that this lament originates in and points to mental laziness; certainly it encourages it, in a dangerous vicious circle. Except for cases of pathological

² Here I refer to late twentieth century sentimental treatments of the Holocaust in narrative art, which either cast the events of the Shoah as a tragic and sacrificial step on the path to the creation of Israel as a nation-state, or that focus on a message of hope and survival in the face of the murder of 6 million people. Films such as *Schindler's List*, *Life is Beautiful* and the 1978 television miniseries *Holocaust* are preeminent examples.

incapacity, one can and must communicate, and thereby contribute in a useful and easy way to the peace of others and oneself, because silence, the absence of signals, is itself a signal, but an ambiguous one, and ambiguity generates anxiety and suspicion. To say that it is impossible to communicate is false; one always can. To refuse to communicate is a failing; we are biologically and socially predisposed to communication, and in particular to its highly evolved and noble form, which is language. All members of the human species speak, no nonhuman species knows how to speak (88-89).

This is somewhat reductive, and Levi focuses more on communication than representation. However, combined with Levi's own large body of work about his experiences during the Shoah, this extract speaks against the 'impossibility' argument regarding testimony or of the representation of life in concentration camps. LaCapra, too, critiques that trauma theory which demonstrates an "extreme, at times exclusive or intransigent, investment in the aesthetic of the sublime and the melancholic (with the aporia as a sublime textual trauma or *mise en abîme*)" (2009 65). This transcendental trend has several suspicious qualities. Not only does it place itself in direct opposition to academic analysis (not in itself necessarily a fault) but it also overvalues one means of expression – anti-expression – over any others, moving too far towards a 'sublime' extreme. The value of the aporia is not to be dismissed, however. Any and all representation, mindless of the sensitive nature of the material and its difficulties, is not necessarily desirable either (but should not be censored). What is more promising is LaCapra's 'ethic of response', an "ethic... mindful of, but not fixated on, the paradoxes and aporia of representation" (67). This ethic is demonstrated in both *Maus* and *Fun Home*. Aporia are an integral part of the structure of both memoirs. But one does not have to resort to tropes of impossible extremity and mystification.

My method, exploratory rather than systematic, deals with the memoirs' narrative strategies, and their narrative registration of time, shame, psychological depth, absence, personal and public history and trauma. I investigate the interrelation between textual and graphic narrative, and the way these two co-mingling elements are used to track traumatic pasts. Despite the understanding that trauma theory brings to bear on reading of these comics, it is not an exclusive critical lens through which to view these works. Hillary L. Chute argues that "*Fun Home* is a book about trauma, but it is not about the impassable or the ineffable. It is rather about hermeneutics; specifically, on every level, *Fun Home* is about the procedure of

close reading and close looking” (2010 182). This thesis is an attempt to read in a similar fashion. Critical theory should be used when applied to its local and specific inhabitation of the text, rather than being externally imposed without any suggestion or relevancy.

My first chapter, “‘Old Father, Old Artificer’: The Drawn Archive’ deals with the memoirs’ use of archival and documentary texts. I draw on Marianne Hirsch’s concept of ‘post-memory’ to explore the ways in which the reproduced photographs, letters and books in both texts use presence to convey traumatic absences, and to simultaneously undermine and confirm Spiegelman and Bechdel’s referential claims. Both authors include a wide range of archival intertexts in their memoirs, and use varying graphic styles to do so. *Maus* incorporates maps, diagrams and a timeline, all recreated from survivors’ oral testimonies, as well as both drawn and actual photographs. *Fun Home* references dozens of books, the currency of Alison’s relationship with her father, and reproduces some of the pages of those books, letters, passports, newspapers, photographs, childhood diaries and fictional and historical maps. This documentary inclusion turns both books into family archives themselves, articulating the unspoken histories that haunt Alison and Artie’s childhoods.

‘Confessive Narratives’ looks at the way Bechdel and Spiegelman engage with ethical issues and dilemmas within their texts. The authors engage with the problem of the violence of writing about others and the questions of silence and catharsis. Confession and its possibilities and limitations are addressed in both memoirs. Spiegelman has long been interested in the complexities of morality; discussing his and Françoise Mouly’s avant-garde comics journal *RAW*, he stated “Most of the artists in *RAW* – I won’t say every single one of them – are moving forward from a moral center. As a result, it just seemed to me to be interesting to make ethics hip” (Silverblatt 134).³ This interest in the hipness of ethics is a response to the free-wheeling nihilism and hedonism of the underground comics scene, which positioned itself in direct opposition to traditional morality, but of which many of its leading lights also engaged in both casual and virulent misogyny. Ethics in *Maus* and *Fun Home* are not part of a new avant-garde of morality, but a necessary element of their historical inquiry.

‘Never Again and Again and Again’ discusses the non-linear chronologies in the two books and their treatment of absences, both formal and thematic. While *Fun Home*’s time strategy is

³ *RAW*’s ethical and esoteric concerns and wit are evident in their varying subtitles, including “The Graphix Magazine of Postponed Suicides” and “The Graphix Magazine That Lost Its Faith in Nihilism”.

decidedly non-linear and recursive, *Maus* uses two parallel linear narratives (as well as one 'superpresent' episode) in order to demonstrate the intrusion of the father's past into the son's present. These non-chronological narrative techniques mimic the traumatized's perception of time.

A note on terminology

The comics memoir is, as its name suggests, a memoir in comics – a nonfiction hand-drawn auto/biography. I choose to use the term comics here, rather than the awkward and in this case misleading 'graphic novel'. Along with the many, many articles and books dedicated to establishing that comics are, in fact, literature, this term is so often employed in a kind of shifty, shameful way, in an attempt to reject the popular and trashy associations of "low" superhero comics and the funny pages in newspapers. Although there is worth in studying the differing development and tropes of commercially produced, collaborative comics (such as the productions of Marvel and DC) and independent comics (and the varying points in between), it is limiting and narrow-minded to expend too much energy on disassociating 'high' and 'low brow' comics. The interminable efforts to argue for the value of comics as literature are much less interesting than the study of comics themselves. Comics' potential, as a medium, for serious artistic merit and can reward academic study will be taken as axiomatic.

I use 'memoir' and 'auto/biography' as terms to describe the two texts, rather than specifically autobiography or other terms. The slash in the middle of auto/biography recognizes the primacy of the fathers' narratives in both memoirs, and their double function as records of the authors' lives and of the lives of their fathers. The distinction between 'confession' and 'memoir' is articulated in chapter two, 'Confessive Narratives', but memoir's popularity as a publishing term and its meaning of 'Records of events or history written from the personal knowledge or experience of the writer, or based on special sources of information' (oed.com) makes it a useful term.

'Shoah' and 'Holocaust' are used here interchangeably. While the criticisms of 'Holocaust' (its Greek etymology means 'burnt offering'; the sacrificial implications of this attribute a meaning and agency to the deaths of the massacred that many find misleading if not offensive) are legitimate, its popularity makes it difficult to reject entirely. My definition of the Holocaust is a

broad one and refers not only to the mass murder of between 5 and 6 million Jews⁴, but also the racially and/or ideologically motivated killing of Romani/Gypsies, homosexuals, political prisoners, Jehovah's Witnesses (among other religious dissidents), those with physical or mental disabilities and Polish and Soviet civilians and prisoners of war by the National Socialist Regime during the Second World War. However, as *Maus* relates the experiences of a Jewish family, 'Holocaust' may be used when referring to the particular genocide of the Jews ('Shoah,' as a Hebrew word, refers exclusively to the murder of Jews).

When discussing comics as a medium, I choose not to follow McCloud in his definition of the word as "plural in form used with a singular verb" (9). I understand McCloud's preference for this grammar, as he is using comics as a collective noun for a medium, like the use of 'film' or 'literature', rather than discussing multiple individual comics. However, as the use of singular verbs with 'comics' is both grating and distracting, I have chosen to employ the popular usage of a plural verb. It is possible (if colloquial or clumsy) to discuss literature generically with the word 'books', just as one may use 'graphic narrative' or 'comics' to discuss the same medium while respecting conventional grammar.

I refer to the authors and historical/contemporary figures as Bechdel and Spiegelman. In order to not confuse the autobiographical self-representations with the artists, and to note the constructed and mediated nature of these representations, I use their avatars' first names, Alison, Artie and Art. The differentiation between Artie and Art is due to the subtle identity shift that occurs between the bulk of the memoir (Artie, as Vladek calls his son) and the persona in the superpresent section of 'Auschwitz (Time Flies)' (Art). Not only is this chapter located both in and out of time, but the human-headed, masked Art functions on a different plane to the Artie who elicits and records Vladek's testimony.

⁴ Raul Hilberg's *The Destruction of the European Jews* tabulates the figure as approximately 5,100,000 (1320), while noting that "the raw data are seldom self-explanatory, and... their interpretation often requires the use of voluminous background materials that have to be analyzed in turn. Assumptions may be piled on assumptions, and margins of error may be wider than they seem. Under these circumstances, exactness is impossible" (1303). Donald Niewyk and Francis Nicosia combine Hilberg's figures with several historians to come up with a low estimate of 4,869,860 and a high estimate of 5,894,716 (421).

Chapter One

‘Old Father, Old Artificer’: The Drawn Archive

The comics medium is not as self-effacing as prose writing, or other ‘realist’ methods of visual representation such as photography or film. The artist’s hand is always evident; the comics page is always clearly mediated by the author. This is also the case in other forms of art, but the often exaggerated and caricatured style of many comics, and the “non-realist” method of representation so widely displayed in the form means that the author’s subjectivity is always at the fore. *Fun Home* and *Maus*’ subjectivity is foregrounded, in part, by their contrast with the rough externality and action of much of the mainstream comic genre in favour of memoir and confession, modes which result in stasis and introspection. Comics’ subjectivity means that their capacity to refer to the external world is particularly contestable. Ann Cvetkovich notes that stylized comic art “reconfigure[s] the relation between the visual and the truthful, demonstrating in visual form testimony’s power to provide forms of truth that are emotional rather than factual.” The desire for historical accuracy and referentiality seems, in these two cases, to come out of the authors’ extreme personal intimacy with their subjects. The use of archives in both *Maus* and *Fun Home* opens up complex systems of meaning, but one of its most simple significations is the support of their referential claims. Documentary evidence is added to strengthen the record of memory. The archival texts are a supplement to the remembered narrative that makes up the body of each book. Along with this movement towards historical accuracy and facticity, both authors question the veracity and authenticity of their remembered testimony. The displaced and ‘unexperienced’ nature of traumatic experience and memory means that the act of testimony itself is “the process and the place wherein the cognizance, the ‘knowing’ of the event is given birth to” (Laub ‘Bearing Witness’ 57). The use and reproduction of archival materials, in part, constitute this act of witnessing.

History carries special weight for marginalised groups. Queer and Jewish histories have traditionally been overlooked or deliberately suppressed by the dominant Western cultural discourse. Histories of the Holocaust are especially fraught, due to both the traumatic nature of the event for those who experienced it and the importance of accurately remembering and

expressing the horror of the genocide. In Rohy's discussion of queer archives, she asks "What does it mean to be historical? The question is particularly charged in queer communities, where the remedy for repression is an ad hoc ethic of full disclosure" (343). Horowitz's *Voicing the Void* explores the tensions involved in writing about the Shoah: "at the heart of Holocaust narrative resides an essential contradiction: an impossibility to express the experience, coupled with a psychological and moral obligation to do so" (16). The question of this sense of 'impossibility' has been discussed in the introduction in this thesis, but I would note here that it seems to function more metaphorically than is intended. The 'impossibility' of expression and representation points more towards a sense of the fundamental questions of how the experience might be expressed (particularly whether traditional representational and narrative methods will suffice) and whether language can ever adequately capture the ethical and existential extremity of the camps. The mere existence of Holocaust and trauma narratives refutes any categorical impossibility of expression. Horowitz suggests that debate around writing about the Holocaust is propelled by

a moral obligation to remember and tell the events truthfully, to transmit historically accurate testimony. The artifice of art – the literary form, generic conventions, metaphors – construed as a thing apart from the events narrated, imposes an unwanted (because unreliable, untruthful) structure that occludes rather than reveals lived experience and historical memory. Literature is thus viewed as implicated in the narratological constraints inherent to writing about the historical events – problems for which the Shoah serves as a test-limits case – and, at the same time, as a special case, judged particularly problematic even when other forms of narrative are not (Horowitz 18).

Non-fictional works do not gain their appearance of authenticity or truthfulness through a privileged relation with 'reality' or lack of artifice, but through various literary strategies, realism being the most obvious. Bruner notes that tact and moderation are qualities that steer the reader away from suspicion, stressing "evidentiary probity – something like 'fairmindedness' towards others' views, an absence of reticence about one's mistakes, and so on" (46). These strategies are both absent and present in *Maus* and *Fun Home*. Bechdel notes that "there's no proof, actually, that my father killed himself" (27), but her belief that his death was intentional is central to her narrative. She dismisses possible evidence for the accidental nature of Bruce's death as "just quibbles" (28). Spiegelman may concede to his father's

protestations that there was no camp orchestra at Auschwitz insofar as he draws a marching crowd over where the orchestra had previously been depicted, but the tops of their instruments remain visible. Leigh Gilmore draws on the cultural and historical role of the confession in noting that “autobiography recuperates the technologies of self-representation present in the confession and deploys them to authorize and deauthorize certain ‘identities’” (14). Reproduced texts are also used to create a sense of emotional intimacy. Janet Malcolm, in *The Silent Woman*, reflects that letters (and by extension other archival texts) “are biography’s only conduit to unmediated experience” (110). This idea is complicated and extended by Spiegelman and Bechdel’s use of archival texts, particularly the drawn texts which are clearly mediated by the authors’ hands.

Caruth’s work on trauma is particularly illuminating when considering witnessing and the archive in these texts. Caruth argues that “To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (4-5). In *Fun Home*, central, traumatic images are repeated as the narrative returns to these pivotal moments: Alison lying on the floor in the foetal position, clutching the phone, hearing the revelation of her father’s gay affairs (twice), and later, hearing the news of her father’s death at a shared college phone (twice); Bruce crossing the road just before he is hit by a truck (thrice); Alison’s revelation of her own sexuality in her campus bookshop (twice); her childhood encounter with the vexing snake (twice). An important exception to this pattern of repetition is the photograph of Roy taken by her father. It only appears once, but it is placed centrally, and functions as a kind of centrefold. It is referenced in the repeated image of Alison’s homosexual epiphany. She is depicted in the campus bookstore, dressed like a spy in a trench coat with the collar up, holding a copy of *Word Is Out*. Her sexual epiphany is signified graphically by a large exclamation point in a speech bubble. The symbolic vocabulary of comics

is used wittily here: the momentous revelation of Alison’s sexuality cannot be articulated in words, but must

be expressed graphically through the language of comics. An important feature of these

repeated panels, that seems to have been overlooked by critics, is the presence of the shadow of Roy's profile behind her (identifiable by his snub nose and intensely curly hair). Not only is Roy the most prominently featured teenaged lover of her father's, he is also the one portrayed in the traumatic erotic snapshot. Literature, barely articulated graphic realization and the history of her father's transgressive homosexuality all come together in this moment of erotic truth. Alison's sudden, revelatory awareness of her queerness is literally shadowed by her father's homosexuality. The implication in her father's desire and artistic appreciation for the beauty of the boy Alison feels when she looks at the photograph of Roy is repeated here. Her sexuality is directly connected with her father's.

Fun Home and *Maus* are saturated with intertextual references and archival materials. These work, in part, to strengthen the truth claims of these auto/biographies. *Fun Home* includes reproductions of drawn photographs (portrayed in a more realist style – using detailed cross-hatching and feathering – than the traditionally 'cartoony' style of the main narrative), maps, diaries, letters, passports and various books. *Maus* includes diagrams, actual photographs of Spiegelman's family, timelines, maps and one of Spiegelman's earlier four-page comics. These archives serve to piece together the memoirs' fractured and hidden histories. The construction of these personal histories, then, works by way of the inclusion of personal, familial and historical records to register the historical and ongoing trauma of the Holocaust and personal tragedy.

There is a clear disjunction between the verisimilitude of the hyperrealistic techniques with which Spiegelman represents and seeks to reproduce his father's voice and the cartoonish, non-realist graphic style of the comic, underscored by the animal heads metaphor. Vladek's narrating voice (not his voice as used in the wartime narrative, which is presented in standard English as he would have been speaking his mother tongue, Polish) is rendered with second-language Eastern European grammar and the easy use of Yiddish and Hebrew terms. Of course, Spiegelman has edited his father's testimony, but there is more than a gesture here towards historical accuracy and authenticity. A considerable portion of the modern day narrative is dedicated to discussing and detailing Art's various methods of transcription – first by hand, then with a tape recorder. There is a strong contrast between this realist style of writing and the partially metaphorical, stylized visual representation of past and present. Spiegelman both works to confirm the referential claims of his text and undermines them.

FOR RICHIEU

AND FOR NADJA

particularly jarring (134). An actual survivor of the death camps – now healthy and handsome again – poses in a clean and well-fitting uniform and stares proudly just to the right of the photographer. Hirsch comments that “The identity of Vladek, the camp survivor, with the man

Spiegelman uses both actual photographs and drawings of photographs. Notably, the photographs he draws, continuing his mouse metaphors, are of Vladek and Anja’s relatives who were killed in the Holocaust. Vladek states, “All what is left, it’s the photos” (1992 115). Although Richie, Artie’s older brother, was killed during the Holocaust, his literal photograph is included in the dedication of *Maus II* as he is part of Spiegelman’s immediate family – who are all represented in actual photographs over the course of the two volumes. The photograph of Vladek in concentration camp drag is

1:

wearing the camp uniform in the picture is purely coincidental. Anyone could have had this picture taken in the same souvenir shop” (25).

The use of actual photographs is made especially unsettling due to the use of the mouse metaphor in the rest of the narrative. Compared to the cartoonish, non-realist images that the reader has been immersed in, the few photographs seem to be in impossibly high resolution, impossibly detailed. Hirsch argues that the reproduction of the photographs, as opposed to the drawn snapshots, means that “these three moments protrude from the narrative like unassimilated and

unassimilable memories... they bring into relief a tension that is always there, on every level of the text” (16). The disturbing quality of the only photograph of Vladek, and its disjunction from the comic panels around it, are emphasised by the offsetting of the photograph at an angle to the black panel behind it, and the other, orderly panels. This technique, of ‘layering’ found objects and artifacts in and on the page, occurs throughout *Maus*, and in the occasional tableaux of documents in *Fun Home*, such as the panel which layers a copy of the local

THE COPY OF CAMUS' A HAPPY DEATH THAT HE'D BEEN READING AND LEAVING AROUND THE HOUSE IN WHAT MIGHT BE CONSTRUED AS A DELIBERATE MANNER.

newspaper on top of the cluttered kitchen table with an edition of Camus' *A Happy Death*. It creates an illusion of thickness on the page, of a scrapbook or family photo album, a factual historical document. The historical and authentic texts are visually raised up from the level of the rest of the remembered narrative.

Anja and Vladek's first son, Richieu, was poisoned by his aunt in order to avoid the camps, and Anja killed herself in 1968, when Spiegelman was twenty. The text of *Maus II*'s dedication to Richieu, and to Spiegelman's daughter Nadja, is positioned above and below a portrait of Richieu as a toddler. 'Prisoner on the Hell Planet,' Spiegelman's early comic on his mother's suicide, reproduced in *Maus I*, begins with a snapshot of Anja standing with the ten-year-old Spiegelman. As with the panel depicting Vladek and Anja's reunion on the final page of *Maus II*, we read these otherwise happy photographs of Richieu and Anja with the knowledge of their great future unhappinesses and tragic deaths. For the viewer of the posthumous portrait, the subject's future and past suffering is thus joined, forming an ouroboros of pain. There is neither the consolation of future hope nor that of past resolution and the possibility of closure. Hirsch notes that "the horror of looking is not necessarily *in* the image but in the story we provide to fill in what is left out of the image. For each image we provide the other, complementary one" (7). The particular shock of viewing these photographs, to a similar but lesser extent than the famous photograph of the child being held up by an SS officer with a gun in the Warsaw ghetto, lies in the narrative and historical contexts. Susan Sontag notes that "photographs state the innocence, the vulnerability of lives heading towards their own destruction, and this link between photography and death haunts all photographs of people" (70). This effect is multiplied exponentially here.

Photographs, of course, remind us that this is a referential text, and break the immersive illusion of the constructed narrative. Hirsch notes that

Maus represents the aesthetic of the trauma fragment, the aesthetic of the testimonial chain – an aesthetic that is indistinguishable from the documentary.... The fragments that break out of the frame are details that function like Barthes' *punctum*; they have the power of the "fetish" to signal and disavow an essential loss (26-27).

Maus' photographic images act as *puncta*. They fracture the hand-drawn and hand-written text around them. Like the image of Vladek in the borrowed camp uniform, the snapshot of Anja and Artie on holiday literally breaks its frame, jutting out of the panel at an angle. The reproduced photographs remind us that, for example, Spiegelman did have an older brother who died as a child in a mercy killing in the Holocaust. The photograph of Vladek posing in a clean, pressed camp uniform, looking healthy, handsome and defiant, however, both works with and against this referential interpretation. Of course, Vladek did, we are told, pose for this photograph upon arriving in Germany after leaving Dachau – the text states “I passed once a photo place what had a *camp* uniform – a new and clean one – to make **souvenir** photos...” (1992 134). And yet his performance as a concentration camp inmate, despite his own history as one, jars with our knowledge of both the effects of concentration camps on the human body and on clothing. This is underlined by the fact that the narrative has dwelt significantly on the starvation, disease and utterly inadequate material provisions in the camps. It also is at odds with our ideas of authenticity around the Holocaust. The experience of a concentration camp inmate is usually conceived of as one that cannot be fully understood – Art comments in *Maus II* that “Some part of me doesn’t want to draw or think about Auschwitz. I can’t visualize it clearly, and I can’t BEGIN to imagine what it felt like” (46) – and yet here is a man, regardless of his personal history, performing as a death camp prisoner. Incorporating this kind of troubling text reflects *Maus'* strategy of turning away from the ineffable when dealing with the Holocaust, and focusing on the ordinary details of survival and the flaws and contradictions of the victims (most clearly of his father). This recalls Levi’s approach in *If This is a Man* (1947), wherein he lists the archetypes that prospered in the camps, and had the best chance of surviving, all the most unsavoury, selfish and cruel of people. Auschwitz is depicted as an inverted meritocracy. Levi and Spiegelman are both interested in human reality rather than religious mystification.

It is useful to consider Hirsch’s concept of post-memory. She defines post-memory thus: it

in my reading, has certainly not taken us beyond memory, but is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Post-memory should reflect back on memory, revealing it as equally constructed, equally mediated by the processes of narration and imagination.... Photography is precisely the medium connecting memory and post-memory (8-9).

The nature of post-memory means that despite not having experienced the Holocaust, Artie is traumatized by his parents' experience of it. For Artie, time cycles back to this trauma in the same way that it would for a survivor. Artie's generational distance from his parent's suffering is reflected in the material distance implied in the reproduced artifactual documents in the text. This material distance also reflects the way that Vladek's memory, despite being immediate and original, is also constructed by photographs and old documents, and needs methods such as timelines and diagrams in order to be both conveyed and conceived. It is no more 'pure' than Artie's narration. Narrated memory alone is not sufficient to represent the past.

The documents that Bechdel reproduces in her memoir – diaries, letters, maps, photographs – act as archival documentary evidence that supports her truth claims. Valerie Rohy notes the extensive and meticulous methods that Bechdel employs to further emphasize the referentiality of her documents:

rendered in detail, often in close-up, are small marks of authenticity: the scrapbook corners on the chapter-head photographs, the precise reproduction of printed words' original fonts, or the 'photographic' cropping of the right and lower edges of a passport.... the presence of minute description – or in the graphic memoir, visual representation – produces narrative accuracy (342).

But suspicion of the entire historical project marks the memoir. The autobiographical theorist Philippe Lejeune describes the 'Autobiographical Pact' as "a contract of identity that is sealed by the proper name" of the author (19). Bechdel does not challenge this pact fundamentally – the authoritative and lyrical narratorial voice of her book structures it to be read as referential and truthful – but she does challenge and complicate the apparent simplicity of this referential model. Bechdel's discussion of the referential failings of her childhood diary making – "the troubled gap between word and meaning" – casts a suspicious eye over the rest of the memoir's referential project (143).

She asks how language can adequately articulate experience or refer to the external world in an environment defined by secrets and silence. At the time of her childhood, it cannot – the claim to full disclosure that the memoir ultimately makes is predicated on distance and time.

Bechdel simultaneously makes a claim for the historical veracity of her narrative and destabilises our assumptions around the idea of historical and retrospective truth.

When I was ten, I was obsessed with making sure my diary entries bore no false witness. But as I aged, hard facts gave way to vagaries of emotion and opinion. False humility, overwrought penmanship, and self-disgust began to cloud my testimony... until... the truth is barely perceptible behind a hedge of qualifiers, encryption, and stray punctuation (169).

Two thirds of the way through the book, Bechdel recounts the 'epistemological crisis' regarding truth and reference in writing that she experienced when she was ten years old, during a period when she suffered from Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. She questions the inescapable subjectivity of her records:

How did I know that the things I was writing were absolutely, objectively true? All I could speak for were 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).

THINGS WERE GETTING FAIRLY ILLEGIBLE BY AUGUST, WHEN WE HAD OUR CAMPING TRIP/INITIATION RITE AT THE BULLPEN.

She begins a personal diary, but soon starts adding the words "I think" before each declarative sentence, qualifiers that were "gossamer sutures in that gaping rift between signifier and signified" (142). This habit becomes so entrenched that in order "to save time I created a shorthand version of *I think*, a curvy circumflex. Soon I began drawing it right over names and pronouns. It became a sort of amulet, warding off evil from my

subjects. Then I realized I could draw the symbol over an entire entry" (142-143). Cvetkovich argues that

the graphic act of striking out words with a mark that is a cross between word and image (and which in turn makes the drawings of the text of the diary become as much image as word) provides its own eloquent testimony to the impossibility of documenting truthfully what she is seeing or experiencing. It suggests the potential ordinariness of the unrepresentability that is the hallmark of some theories of trauma.

The doubled nature of 'unrepresentability' is here reflected by Alison's writing of a word or declarative statement and then qualifying and partially obscuring it with her circumflex. That which is 'unrepresentable' is simultaneously represented and denied, just as critics like Laub record the testimonies of survivors whom they interview and declare the content of those testimonies to be impossible.

This struggle with representation and the desire for historical authenticity and accuracy are also addressed in *Maus*. There are many signs in the memoir that establish and reinforce its referential truth claims: the 'reproduction' of Vladek's voice with its non-native speaker grammar, the inclusion of diagrams and maps, the representation of the process of transcription and Artie's promise to Vladek after that he will keep the story of one of Vladek's romantic affairs secret, a promise that is broken as it is narrated.

Cvetkovich notes that "Bechdel has suggested that she draws actual photographs to remind the reader that her story is connected to actual lives, echoing Hirsch's emphasis on the photograph's access to the shock of the unassimilable real and its ability to hover between life and death by bringing the absent dead into the realm of the living." Halfway through *Fun Home*, Bechdel shows a photograph that she found in a box of family snapshots. The 'centrefold' picture of Alison's teenaged babysitter, Roy, erotically lying on a bed in only his underwear, is the most tangible and direct evidence of her father's sexual affairs with teenage boys, more confronting than either of her parent's communicated admissions. The snapshot

functions in a similar but inverted way to Anja's missing diaries in *Maus*, destroyed by Art's father in a depressive rage after Anja's suicide. Both the snapshot and the diaries are the texts at the centre of each memoir – although in the case of *Maus*, this central text is traumatically absent, whereas the photograph of Roy is traumatically present in Bechdel's life as evidence of her father's closeted and transgressive desire. The huge drawn hand shown holding the photograph, more than twice life-size,

inevitably reproduces the reader's hand, holding the book. We are placed in Bechdel's, and by extension her father's role, as the illicit and transgressive voyeurs of the erotic spectacle of

Roy's body. This technique, of drawing the hand holding the text from the edge of the page, unfettered by panels and gutters, comes from *Maus I*, in the section where Spiegelman reproduces his early comic, 'Prisoner on the Hell Planet', in the context of its having upset his father. The reader is implicated in the possession and consumption of hidden, disturbing texts.

Both Spiegelman and Bechdel use the technique of drawing hands, protruding from the edge of the page, holding documentary texts, which mimic the reader's hand holding the books themselves. Spiegelman draws Art's hand holding 'Prisoner on the Hell Planet', which is a repetition of the hand holding the photograph of the child Art and Anja in the first titular panel of that comic. The reader is placed in the discomfiting role of the voyeur by being implicated in the witnessing of these histories. The illicit feeling of snooping into private histories, much like hearing an intriguing but upsetting piece of gossip, that can accompany reading personal memoirs, is brought into sharp relief by this breaking of the frame. In *Fun Home*, one feels particularly uncomfortable replicating and repeating the erotic gaze of Bruce Bechdel towards the young, vulnerable babysitter. Bechdel conflates herself with her father's gaze, appreciating the erotic and artistic qualities of the photograph, positioning the reader as both a voyeur and a passive, permissive witness, and therefore one who potentially takes advantage of the young

man or commits the transgressive erotic act itself (although of course the reader's emotional and intellectual response may differ from Bruce Bechdel's once they are placed in this complicit position). The image of Roy's photograph is not

placed in a panel, and therefore has an immediate emotional impact. The wash reaches to the edges of the page, recalling the black mournful border around the reproduction of 'Prisoner on the Hell Planet' in *Maus I*. The border is visible around the edges of the pages when the book is closed; Spiegelman notes in *The Complete Maus CD-Rom* that "it acts as a funereal border."

This repetition of voyeurs and witnesses is prefigured in the panel immediately prior to the Roy 'centrefold'. Bruce looks over Alison's shoulder as they both visually consume an erotically posed, shirtless male fashion model in *Esquire*. The reader is implicit in this series of observers, in a kind of mise en abyme. Bechdel figures herself and her father as doubled aesthetic and erotic observers and appreciators. She comments on their mutual appreciation: "Between us lay a slender demilitarized zone – our shared reverence for masculine beauty. But I wanted the muscles and tweed like my father wanted the velvet and pearls – subjectively, for myself. The objects of our desire were quite different" (99). Alison desires the butch styling of the model, while her father desires the male model himself. The text boxes around the photograph of Roy are not placed in any clear order of reading (except for the longest box on the lower right, which seems to be the final box) – and reading them in different orders does not seem to significantly affect one's interpretation of the image and text. This echoes the confusion of Bechdel's experience and the unordered openness of her free association of thoughts, in this experience for which there is no clear prescriptive model. Her commentary expresses this uncertainty:

Perhaps I identify too well with my father's illicit awe. A trace of this seems caught in the photo, just as a trace of Roy has been caught on the light-sensitive paper.... The blurriness of the photo gives it an ethereal, painterly quality. Roy is gilded with morning seaside light. His hair is an aureole.... In fact, the picture is beautiful. But would I be assessing its aesthetic merits so calmly if it were of a seventeen-year-old girl? Why am I not properly outraged? (100-101).

Cvetkovich suggests that "Mimicking her father as witness to the image, Alison is brought closer to him only at the risk of replicating his illicit sexual desires." For Alison, consuming her father's texts connects her with him in a positive yet troubling way; for Spiegelman, listening to his father's testimony and consuming artifactual texts creates post-memory trauma.

The series of repeated observers and voyeurs stands for one of the overarching themes of the memoir. Bechdel retroactively observes and analyses her father (and herself, and her project), and we the readers repeat her actions of observation and analysis. What does it mean for us to witness her witnessing? What does it mean to confess on behalf of someone else, and what does it mean for us as readers to be witnesses of this second-hand confession? Does the

confession by proxy hold the same therapeutic and penitential value that personal confession is considered to have?

Bechdel's use of more 'realistically' drawn family photographs as her chapter headings,

CHAPTER 1

OLD FATHER, OLD ARTIFICER

complete with old-fashioned photo corners of the kind used to secure photographs in older photograph albums, owes an obvious debt to Spiegelman's chapter title pages. *Maus'* chapters all begin with a page with the number of the chapter, and a rectangular image with a more detailed than usual drawing of one of the images within the following chapter. The 'realist' techniques of cross-hatching and shading are used to a greater and

finer extent than in the usual panels of the comic, although, like Bechdel's, these drawings are not photorealistic. Bechdel's use of this technique suggests the family photograph album, although rather than establishing a censored and idealistic family narrative, as most family albums are wont to do, the photographs are read and presented for their suppressed and destabilising content. The main contrast between the chapter title pages in *Maus* and *Fun Home* is the latter's use of actual photographs as referents. Comparatively, this points to the difference in archival materials for the

two writers' projects. Bechdel's domestic and familial archive is closely documented through snapshots and diaries and novels, texts which were comfortably and readily accessible, even as those texts both occlude and disclose family secrets and personal trauma. The archival documents of the Holocaust, on the other hand, are repeatedly marked by a lack or absence. The pre-war photographs of Vladek's family point to those murdered in the Holocaust. Anja's destroyed diary metaphorically represents the absence of Anja herself. The maps, diagrams

and timeline that Spiegelman includes in the text are made up retrospectively from the testimony of Vladek and Pavel. The Holocaust is repeatedly marked as a place of textual and archival absence, the death camps in particular. There are no photographs of Vladek and Anja's experiences in hiding and in Auschwitz, and the written documents of that time have not survived. The artifactual materials compiled and constructed in *Fun Home* and *Maus* act as a kind of memorial shrine, a supplement to the loss of dead family members and the loss enacted by trauma.

The two chapter title page images in *Maus* which come closest to resembling archival documents are the very first and the very last, pre- and post-war. The image for the first chapter, 'The Sheik', mimics the film poster for the Rudolph Valentino film later reproduced in that chapter. The image for the final chapter of *Maus II*, 'The Second Honeymoon,' imitates the style of an art deco postcard, and is repeated in the panel announcing Artie's arrival in Florida. It is at the beginning and end of Vladek's narrative that his experience is 'normalized,' and fits into known archetypes: the urbane lothario's tumultuous affair, the lovers' happy reunion after a period of separation and struggle. Unlike the Spiegelmans' experiences in the death camps, these parts of the story easily fit into the reader's frame of reference, and Spiegelman uses clichéd pop cultural images to emphasize this.

Fun Home's various maps add particular strength to the text's referential claims. They work not only to enrich the reader's understanding of the environment that Alison and her family lived in, but also to connect the reader to this world. It is, literally, geographically, part of our world – Sean Wilsey, in his review of *Fun Home* for *The New York Times*, travels to Beech Creek and uses the maps in the book as a guide, praising it as a "memoir you can navigate by!" However, maps are not the exclusive domain of non-fiction works. Many novels have fictional maps in them – Faulkner's detailed map of Yoknapatawpha County in *Absalom, Absalom* comes to mind. To emphasise this even further, Bechdel reproduces her *Wind in the Willows Coloring Book* map, and then underneath, has a panel the same size and shape which is a map of her town. She states, "I took for granted the parallels between this landscape and my own. Our creek flowed in the same direction as Ratty's river" (146). The fictional world and Alison's familial world are mirrored and connected through more than childhood whimsy and imagination. The artifice and lies of her parent's marriage are linked with the fictional works

that are so pervasive in her childhood home and the carefully established realism of the landscape is undermined by the comparison.

However, Bechdel's many representations of maps and diaries serve not only to support the factuality of her record. These archival documents function as primary texts, which stand in opposition to the deadly secrecy of her childhood home: they are concrete, truthful, evidentiary. The map of Bruce Bechdel's life ("Born; lived; buried; died" (140) as "a solipsistic circle of self, from autodidact to autocrat to autocide" (140)) reflects Bechdel's claustrophobic upbringing and bond with her father. Bechdel reads her father's letters and photographs (and their gothic revival house) for sexual and artistic evidence. She conflates the two, reading the purple prose of his letters and his baroque lyrical flourishes as indications both of his semi-repressed homosexuality and of the artistic sensibility that she would inherit and refine. The contrast between Bechdel's fully realised artistry and sexuality and her father's abortive identity becomes most apparent as Bruce finally becomes more active in his daughter's life, as he begins "to sense [her] potential as an intellectual companion" (198).

Bruce's letters and his overzealous enthusiasm for the modernist literature that Alison responds so coolly to (he writes exuberant letters to Alison and her mother praising his favourite writers) come across unflatteringly next to Bechdel's elegant and measured prose. She cites her father's letter on *As I Lay Dying*: "How about that dude's way with words. He knows how us country boys think and talk. If you ever – gawdforbid – get homesick, read Darl's monologue" (200). Although Bechdel makes a strong claim for having "inherited [her] father's inventive bent" (231), he is not, apparently, her literary peer. The disparity between Bechdel and her father's fates is most clearly articulated after the ten-year-old Alison encounters a frightening snake on a camping trip. The snake comes to stand as a complex, shifting metaphor for Alison and her father's transgressive sexualities, and the private relationship that is created between them as a result. As discussed in chapter three, 'Never Again and Again and Again', Bechdel comments that "my father's end was my beginning. Or more precisely, that the end of his lie coincided with the beginning of my truth" (116-117). The slippage between their identities is explored throughout 'In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower': Alison and Bruce share many of the same qualities, but their differing historical and cultural situations and Alison's proclivity for confessional disclosure make their fates tragically divergent.

The final panel of the same chapter depicts Bechdel's hands holding drawn photos of herself at twenty-one and Bruce at twenty-two. The snapshots overlap, and Bechdel lists the similarities between the photographs, concluding: "the exterior setting, the pained grin, the flexible wrists, even the angle of shadow falling across our faces – it's about as close as a translation can get" (120). The substantial 'overlap' between the two photographs is underscored by Bechdel's insistent comparisons of Bruce with herself. She emphasizes their sameness as well as their apparent differences again and again in the memoir. Through the 'vast network of transversals' (102) that is their life together, Alison and Bruce are, paradoxically, twinned 'inversions of one another' (98). As Bechdel is sympathetic, this doubling mitigates the reader's moral judgment of her father. Bruce is set up both as Alison's opposite ("I was Spartan to my father's Athenian. Modern to his Victorian. Butch to his nelly. Utilitarian to his aesthete" (15)), and as her double. They are both secretive gay artists and Bechdel describes her process of coming out as "a gradual, episodic, and inevitable convergence with my abstracted father" (203). When depicting the matched Polaroid and picture, Bechdel repeats the imagery of a hand emerging from the edge of the panel, holding the photograph, although in these panels the hands are approximately life size, rather than the greatly enlarged hands of the centrefold snapshot. These images are also constrained inside panels, unlike the Roy image, which takes over the whole page. The gutters of the later pages mediate the effect of the photographs and allow for a cool emotional distance.

The endpapers of the two memoirs, while not strictly part of the archival images within the texts, help to construct the books themselves as archival texts. Both memoirs are archives of their authors' personal and familial histories, and the images inscribed on the endpapers help to transition the reader into a historical approach. *Maus I*'s endpapers are grey on black woodcut style drawings of mice in the ghetto. Stylistically they are halfway between the drawings in *Maus* and the German Expressionist woodcuts of 'Prisoner on the Hell Planet' (which recall the images of suffering expressed by such artists as Käthe Kollwitz). They are also drawn as negatives. The mice all have different clothing, bodies and expressions. They are not just individual in their costumes but in their own physical bodies and faces as well. However, by *Maus II*, which begins, in the historical part of the story, with the Spiegelmans' arrival at Auschwitz and covers Vladek's time there, the endpapers are of mice in a death camp, wearing the camp uniform. The endpapers to this book are drawn in the same style and palette as the

first. At this point the mice are effectively identical, much as the torturous and dehumanising methods of the concentration camp robbed Jews of individuality.

The endpapers of *Fun Home* (at least, of the original first edition hardback) are an approximated reproduction of one of the William Morris wallpapers that Bechdel's father used in their family home. It has been noted by Chute, in an interview with Bechdel that the physical book, without the dustcover, is structured like a home: the neon orange cover features an extended version of the outlined diagram of the exterior of the house and the creative isolation of its inhabitants, while the internal endpapers are like wallpaper ('An Interview with Alison Bechdel'). The diagram of the house on page 134 illustrates the family's situation as "an artists' colony. We ate together, but otherwise were absorbed in our separate pursuits" (134). Bechdel later comments, "And indeed, if our family was a sort of artists' colony, could it not be even more accurately described as a mildly autistic colony? Ourselves were all we had" (139). The graphic construction of the book as a house establishes it both as an opportunity for the reader to intrude into an excessively private, ingrown family sphere, and as a kind of family album, complete with reproduced photographs and all the sentimental nostalgia and grief for a lost time which that entails.

Maus is drawn in an exclusively black and white palette. The only time grey is seen is in the paintings that provide the backdrop to the two contents pages. There are no washes: the entire comic appears to have been rendered with pen and ink. This speaks to the harshness of the narrative, the bleakness of Vladek's history, and also to the reportorial nature of the piece. It makes a truth-claim: despite the hand-drawn nature of the images, and the visual metaphors employed throughout, there is an implied immediacy, a controlled lack of 'craft,' a pretence of unmediated representation in this style. The grey-grey wash, almost like weathered verdigris, used in *Fun Home*, along with the pen and ink drawings, creates a different effect altogether. It suggests the wash of nostalgia or of memory. Bechdel has suggested in an interview that her minimalist palate was a response to her father's rococo love of colour: "cartooning was a way to just dispense with color" (Samer).

Bechdel's archive is much more textually focused, whereas Spiegelman places his emphasis on visual evidence. This reflects both Bechdel's more Latinate and literary writing style and her obsession with the literature surrounding her father and herself. The memoir does include several maps, diagrams and carefully cross-hatched and shaded drawn photographs. However,

it also insistently reproduces many written texts: Bechdel's own early and adolescent diaries, her father's courtship letters to her mother, her parents' correspondence with her when she is at college, dictionaries, novels, newspapers, magazines, encyclopaedias, a university course catalogue, and non-fiction texts such as *Word is Out*. These intertexts enrich the historical world of Bechdel's childhood. As a *künstlerroman* – a *bildungsroman* of an artist – these texts also bring us towards the textually embedded work we are reading. Bechdel's relationship with her father, and the artistic and sexual inheritance she owes him, are structured around books and texts. They find it difficult to communicate otherwise: "Books - the ones assigned for my English class – continued to serve as our currency" (200). Before she comes out to him, he lends her Colette's *Earthly Paradise*. Bechdel figures their relationship through the lens of Daedalus and Icarus, Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom. The chapter titles refer to modernist texts – Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as A Young Man*, Camus' *A Happy Death*, Wallace Stevens's "Sunday Morning", the second volume of Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* and Wilde's *An Ideal Husband*⁵. The references to *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* are relevant in the sense that the novel follows Stephen's move away from Catholicism to a more truthful and authentic life as an artist. This mirrors Bechdel's own move away from the oppressive and stifling environment of her childhood into artistic and sexual self-realisation. More interestingly, it also follows the pattern of Bechdel's literary 'saving' and revisioning of her father. She alters his representation from domestic tyrant to benevolent (albeit qualified) paternal figure over the course of the narrative.

Bechdel's references to the modernist canon and to postmodern queer works are ubiquitous. The books that Bechdel's father reads and the books that guided the young Alison in her realisation of her sexual identity are not treated with the same reverence that the family texts (diaries, photographs etc) are treated. The familial texts are artifacts of the family's life, whereas the novels and queer treatises are essential fabric of that life, but of a different order. The move from modernism to postmodernism – the latter rejecting many of the principles of the former but still being its natural heir – reflects the artistic and literary relationship between

⁵ The final chapter title both continues and moves away from this model. 'The Antihero's Journey' is a wittily ironic inversion of Joseph Campbell's narrative archetype 'the hero's journey', coined in his 1949 *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. Not only does this trope of literary criticism come out at the end of the modernist period, but Campbell's main name for the idea, the monomyth, is taken from Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*.

Alison and Bruce. Alison rejects Bruce's closeted life and his frustrated artistic tendencies. She, tentatively at first, and then wholeheartedly, engages in the queer community, and becomes an artist, although her comics medium is not in the direct line of the modernist novels and poetry that her father so loved and admired. Comics, it may be argued, can be seen as an amalgamation of her father's impassioned and obsessive reading (the same medium he uses to court his future wife (63), seduce adolescent boys (61), and bond with his daughter – even tacitly encouraging her homosexuality by lending her Colette's *Earthly Paradise*) and his baroque love of visual arts. His emotional investment in visual beauty is detailed at the end of chapter five: "My father once nearly came to blows 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" (150). Bechdel links queer (specifically lesbian) culture and the high modernist canon, encompassing her parent's love of art, interior design, music, theatre and literature. By connecting the two, she moves queer culture in from the margins, but does not seek to flatten out the differences in the two realms. Furthermore, Bechdel's focus on Proust's now outdated "antiquated clinical term," 'inverts' both neatly fits her thematic expression of Alison and Bruce's relationship as doubles ("Not only were we inverts. We were inversions of one another" (98)) and situates them in a space of possibility and liminality. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick suggests that "inversion models... locate gay people – whether biologically or culturally – at the threshold between genders" (88). This positioning at a threshold connects them to their artistic and creative interests: it opens them up to further possibility.

Bechdel's own choice of style is also a response to her father's controlling censorship of her artistic consumption and production. She recounts how as a fairly small child, she was colouring in her *The Wind In the Willows Coloring Book* when her father criticised her decision to colour the canary-coloured caravan her favourite shade of midnight blue. She sarcastically describes her father's intervention as a "crayonic tour de force" (131) and depicts her child self as walking away, uninterested, while her father is absorbed in colouring. As a university freshman, he tries to dictate her reading, telling her that she "damn well better identify with every page" of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (201). Bechdel's commentary notes that "it's unclear whether he was the vicarious teacher or the vicarious student.... Eventually, his excitement began to leave little room for my own.... and by the end of the year I was suffocating" (201). However, although her interest in colour does not survive her father's

interference (and only endures in *Fun Home* in its minimalist grey green wash), her love of literature is salvaged from his overbearing criticism through their bonding over Colette and Kate Millett. This is reflected both in the structuring of the memoir in and through various works of literature and also in Bechdel's literary prose style.

The final two pages of *Fun Home* return to the Icarus metaphor that began the memoir. The commentary reads: "What if Icarus hadn't hurtled into the sea? What if he'd inherited his father's inventive bent? What might he have wrought? He did hurtle into the sea, of course. But in the tricky reverse narration that impels our entwined stories, he was there to catch me when I leapt" (231-232). Icarus is used in the book to refer to both Alison and her father. At the beginning, the Icarian game involves Alison suspended in the air, supported by Bruce. However, in this final instance it refers most literally to Bruce – as supported by her statement that "He did hurtle into the sea, of course" – and it wonders what Bruce's life might have been if he had followed his "erotic truth" (232). In the final panel, the Icarus metaphor is applied again to Bruce in the continuing use of 'he' to refer to Icarus/Bruce, but Alison is again graphically placed in the same position as she is on the first page – suspended in air, (tenuously) supported by her father – an obviously Icarian position. The "tricky reverse narration" oscillates between Alison and her father, at once polar opposites and twinned spirits.

Despite Bechdel's repeated insistence on historical accuracy and reference, at the end of the memoir she moves away from historical and documentary truth and towards "erotic truth". She revisions the artifactual photograph that begins her final chapter. She reclaims her father from what a cool reading of the historical record (adultery with adolescents, verbally abusive, emotionally distant) might lead us to believe about his character. It is apt that *Ulysses* is used as the framing text for the final chapter, as *Ulysses* famously uses a wide range of different styles of literary expression. It reconceives how a novel might work, and moves away from the high realism of the nineteenth century. Bechdel, too, employs both a range of archival materials and of perspectives on her childhood, considering different ways to read her past and her father's life.

History and trauma are not merely materialised through archival texts in *Fun Home* and *Maus*; it is the archival texts that hold and re-enact both history and trauma. Gardner, in a discussion of archival comics, suggests that "the comic form is ideally suited to carrying on the vital work

[Walter] Benjamin called for generations earlier: making the present aware of its own 'archive,' the past that it is always in the process of becoming" (803). The clear centrality of personal and political history to these two memoirs is reflected in the complex layering of photographs and documents that supplement their remembered narratives. Both Spiegelman and Bechdel affirm and destabilise assumptions around historical accuracy and authenticity through the use of a wide range of documentary texts.

Chapter Two

Confessive Narratives: Shame, Testimony and the Limits of Redemption

All such things of the war, I tried to put out from my mind once for all... until you *rebuild* me all this from your questions.

- Spiegelman, *Maus II*

Sexual shame is in itself a kind of death.

- Bechdel, *Fun Home*

Late in the course of *Fun Home*, Bechdel narrates an episode which interweaves her mother's role in a local performance of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the Watergate scandal, Alison's secret menstruation and masturbation, and her father's court-ordered psychiatric treatment for buying underage boys beer. Secrecy, lies and willful ignorance inhabit every page of this chapter, titled, with bitter irony, 'The Ideal Husband'. The chapter title image is a drawn photograph of Bechdel's mother applying stage make-up, concealing and altering her true appearance in preparation for an elaborate performance, much like the daily performance necessary in her own life as well as that of Alison and Bruce. When recounting Alison's childhood diary-keeping that occurred during this period, Bechdel comments on the failings of reticence and chosen muteness: "By the end of November, my earnest daily entries had given way to the implicit lie of the blank page, and weeks at a time are left unrecorded" (186).

The rich veins of guilt and shame in the Bechdel family, which are expressed overwhelmingly as silence, are countered by Bechdel's discourse.

Discussion of the fallibility of language is an acknowledgement of the ethically contentious aspects of the memoir. By acknowledging that language (and representation in general and specifically) is mediated and subjective and ultimately limited, Bechdel and Spiegelman reject any claim to moral or narrative authority. Each story is, despite Spiegelman's generic animal heads, very personally specific. It is the testimonial narrative in *Maus* that emphasizes its specificity: although Vladek's testimony is his own personal history, it would be easy for a second or third generation reader to conflate it with other generic survivor narratives. Both books attempt to reconcile past trauma by ordering experience into a coherent narrative as a way to give it meaning. *Maus* undermines and deconstructs this impulse by its use of multiple endings which critique the popular redemptive narrating of the Holocaust (employed in such narratives as the previously noted *Holocaust*). Bechdel is more explicit in her imposition of a shape and a meaning on her narrative. However, she also undermines her own insistence on her interpretation of her father's life by discussing the possibility that her father did not commit suicide; by obviously reordering the ending to make it more positive; by discussing how her prioritising of her father's sexuality in her account of his life could be a misreading; and by acknowledging that if he had come out in his youth she would not have been born.

The impossibility of the representation and expression of traumatic experience is an academic and popular commonplace. Nancy K. Miller and Jason Tougaw articulate this sense accurately in their introduction to *Extremities*: "At the extreme limits of representation... there is a point where what can't be put into words is what we just can't stop talking about, without ever quite getting there" (18). However, this trope offers its own limitations when confronted with what is now a fairly vast corpus of works using trauma and the Holocaust as subject matter.

Obviously representations of the experience of the death camps do not 'transfer' that experience to the reader. A representation cannot literally recreate an experience, and yet there seems to be a fear amongst critics that narratives, particularly fictional or 'embellished' ones, do violence to the original experience or to the person by whom it was experienced, by over-writing and solidifying one version of events. Adorno's oft-cited maxim, that 'to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric' is reductive at best, and was later qualified by Adorno himself, although this has not affected its fame. Silence in the face of trauma may be as

inadequate as the overwrought kitsch of sentimentalised histories, such as the aforementioned *Holocaust* miniseries and *Schindler's List*. Bechdel and Spiegelman wrangle with the problem of representing the past without betraying it, or while remaining aware of any inevitable betrayal that may occur. Both authors address the key concern of the adequacy of representations, and the question of who has the right to represent and speak. Furthermore, comics' central use of stylized images offers a representation that is more self-aware of its own representative qualities than the sole use of the written word. As Chute argues, "against a valorization of absence and aporia, graphic narrative asserts the value of presence, however complicit and contingent" (2010 2). The very existence of non-fiction graphic narratives, regardless of how much they discuss unrepresentability, argues for the possibility of some level of representation, no matter how mediated or conditional. The non-realist stylization of comics acknowledges its own mediation and paradoxically may offer a more comprehensive representation by refusing to resolve its own absences.

Spiegelman and Bechdel both engage with a range of ethical issues in their memoirs. Their approach is characterised by uncertainty and ambiguity. They avoid any kind of external or self-imposed rigid moral code, instead treating each problem as irresolvable and various in its implications. They do not come to clear conclusions regarding the 'violence' of writing about others' lives, or profiting from the representation of others' suffering. Ann Cvetkovich argues that Bechdel and Spiegelman

use ordinary experience as an opening onto revisionist histories that avoid the emotional simplifications that can sometimes accompany representations of even the most unassimilable historical traumas. Thus, one of Spiegelman's most important contributions to Holocaust representations is not the history of the camps themselves but his exploration of his ambivalent relation to his father.... Bechdel refuses easy distinctions between heroes and perpetrators, but doing so via a figure who represents a highly stigmatized sexuality is a bold move.

Bechdel very carefully negotiates the sensitive area of her father's sexual 'transgressions'. She never dismisses the seriousness of Bruce's actions, either generally or personally. However, she does not denounce him as a criminal or a 'paedophile' either, although some trace of filial loyalty would presumably prevent this. The term 'pederast' is never used, although Bruce's desire for boys in their mid to late teens rather than children or adult men (although,

amusingly, an affair with his middle-aged court-appointed psychologist is hinted at (185)) and his characterisation as “Athenian” (15) suggests it. Bechdel is less interested in classification and condemnation of her father than she is in her own tangled relation to him.

The conclusion of each book offers a nuanced and complex treatment of its ethical

investigations.

Spiegelman's final page dazzlingly and devastatingly refuses the possibilities of catharsis or positive narrative closure. He does this elegantly by visually delivering the sentimentally resolved narrative ending of his parent's reunion, supported by Vladek's dismissal of the traumas his narrative has recounted: "More I don't need to tell you. We were both very

happy, and lived happy, happy ever after" (136). The next panel cuts to Art sitting on the edge of Vladek's bed, holding his tape recorder as Vladek holds up his hand and says "So... let's stop, please, your tape recorder..." (136). The final panel depicts Vladek rolling over in bed, closing down his testimony with the complaint, "I'm **tired** from talking, Richieu, and it's *enough* stories for now..." (136) as Art stands by, dejectedly and silently holding his recorder. The tip of the Spiegelmans' gravestone overlaps these final two panels, metaphorically bringing the presence of death into the bedside scene. Death accompanies the end of the testimony. Beneath the image of his parents' tombstone, Spiegelman's signature and the dates of the composition of *Maus*, '1978-1991' close the page. The use of these dates immediately after an image which includes his parents' birth and death dates suggests death for Spiegelman himself.

Furthermore, the positioning of his name underneath the image of his parents' grave, and visually underneath three separate 'endings', suggests that Spiegelman is effectively buried underneath the weight of his family history and his parents' lives. Chute notes that "*Maus* eschews the closure implied by the concept of a moral text, offering instead multiple layers representing time as space; an unstable interplay of presence and absence; and productive, cross-discursive collisions" (2009 352).

The image of the lovers' reunion is set against the iris that is a recurrent motif throughout the narrative. The white iris on a black background is employed to evoke associations with the device of irises used in old films, and also with the Nazi flag. Its first instance is in the image for the contents page of 'My Father Bleeds History', as Vladek and Anja dance in front of a white disc. This image refers to the section in Chapter Two, 'The Honeymoon', where the Spiegelmans dance at the sanatorium in Czechoslovakia, when Anja is suffering from what appears to be postnatal depression. It is also,

notably, the chapter in which the characters see the swastika for the first time, hanging in the centre of a Czech town. The iris is also seen (and its filmic associations are most strongly

evoked) as Vladek begins his testimony for the first time. Vladek is depicted on his exercycle, and his body stretches over three panels. A circular panel with an image of Vladek as a young, sophisticated man is placed where the wheel of the exercycle would be. The iris motif parodies the narrative conventions of Vladek's testimony, particularly his figuring of his younger self as a more pragmatic and

shrewd Rudolph Valentino figure, and the romantic reunion at the end. The comforting clichés of Vladek's evaluation of Anja's and his life together as "happy, happy ever after" (136) and the image of the embracing couple are undermined by the reader's knowledge of Anja's subsequent suicide, Art's struggle with drugs and depression, Vladek's continuing unhappiness and post-traumatic nightmares, the destruction of Anja's diaries, Vladek's unsuccessful second marriage with Mala, and Art and Vladek's dysfunctional relationship. The multiple endings (the reunion, the conclusion of the testimony, the gravestone and Spiegelman's signature) refuse

the possibilities of catharsis or positive narrative closure and insist upon the ongoing and

inescapable trauma of the Holocaust.

Spiegelman describes this final page in his audio commentary on the CD-ROM of *The Complete Maus*:

The way the book ends also has like different endings compounding themselves so that you have the first four panels allow [sic] Vladek and Anja to come back

together and give you that stupid satisfying ending that comes with every movie you've ever seen... there's something absolutely dim-witted to me about taking pleasure in this in the end. It's impossible when you read a story, you're just trained to achieve some kind of lump in your throat when the lovers are united. As if all this carnage and death hadn't happened, as if nine-tenths of the family wasn't gone, as if their lives weren't mutilated forever as you know all too well by what you've read before and that particular dichotomy is where the crucible of fiction and non-fiction crushing up against each other is made most manifest for me.

Spiegelman manages to critique these narrative conventions by employing and then subverting them. He addresses the irreconcilable trauma of the Holocaust through this series of conclusions which refuse to offer resolution. Spiegelman has noted elsewhere that "that whole book in fact, then rests on the third end, which is the tombstone of Vladek and Anja finally reunited as dirt. And to have the name Spiegelman above my signature was also conscious so that the book just keeps ending and folds in on itself in order to get out" (*The Complete Maus*). The shape of the grave, and the grass that surrounds it, form a kind of triangle that points back up into the text, forcing the reader's eye back up the page, allowing the text to visually reverse itself, refusing the possibility of an exit out of the suffering of history. *Maus* does not only suggest the value of endlessly returning to the telling of the tale of

the Holocaust, but asserts that it is inevitable. The Holocaust is an on-going trauma for all those touched by it. The memoir employs the emotionally manipulative catharsis of the clichéd happy ending in order to refuse it and its false consolation.

This refusal of healing and comfort in response to the ongoing trauma of the Holocaust is first evoked in the prologue to *My Father Bleeds History*. Rejected by his friends and injured, the child Artie goes to his father, who is “fixing something” (5), for consolation – to be ‘fixed’ himself. Instead Vladek holds Artie’s perception of his friends up to the standard of the Holocaust, concluding that “If you lock them together in a room with no food for a week... THEN you could see what it is, friends!” (6). All ideas and conceptions must be revisioned in a post-Holocaust world. The continuing effects of its trauma do not allow for resolution. If the Holocaust does not make language as a vehicle for representing the meaning of such horror redundant, it does demolish the conventions of narrative that give meaningful and hopeful shape to human experience. Of course, in terms of Artie and Vladek’s relationship, the episode is indicative of its dysfunction, their lack of effective communication (and of how the Holocaust stands as an immovable obstacle in the way of the possibility of this), and the sense that Vladek’s authentic trauma and experience will always overshadow any experience that Artie has or will have. This feeling is elaborated on in *And Here My Troubles Began*, when Art goes to see his therapist, Pavel, in the ‘Time Flies’ metanarrative. Art, having literally regressed into an infantile state, complains that he was “told that I couldn’t do anything as well as he could” (44).

Fun Home recounts familial trauma, but the ending indicates a level of refusal to treat the acts of confession and testimony as wholly cathartic and healing. Bechdel references the final page of *Maus* in her doubled ending. While Bechdel employs the same technique of multiple endings, her final page moves in a slightly different direction. The final page of *Fun Home* begins with the first panel of a frighteningly close front view of a truck, presumably from the perspective of her father immediately before his death, followed by a re-angled vision of the photograph that begins the chapter (the child Alison jumping into Bruce’s supportive arms). She occludes the negative possibilities and connotations of her father’s story to end on a largely positive note: “But in the tricky reverse narration that impels our entwined stories, he was there to catch me when I leapt” (232). This claim of spiritual and artistic inheritance and emotional support is only partly successful when one considers that critics such as Julia Watson have questioned the historical truth of this final image, even though it corresponds to the

'photograph' chapter heading. Bechdel claims that every drawn photograph corresponds to a

real one. This narrative technique, of ending and yet leaving the text open, implies a suspicion of the closing action of narrative. The trauma of Bechdel's father's death and the mystery of his life cannot be wholly resolved and put aside. In the final moment of her text Bechdel moves away from the memoir's earlier destabilising actions, which forced the reader to regard Bruce with suspicion, as the keeper of destructive secrets and as a menacing presence in the Bechdels' family life. The final image is of complete trust and support,

absent of any suspicion. There is a movement away from complication and distrust. Yet the picture of the truck, overwhelming, silent, terrifying, evocative of the mystery surrounding Bruce's death and the larger unknowability of his clandestine sex life and his inner life, hangs over and haunts the positive final panel.

Bechdel, recalling Spiegelman's refusal of tidy narrative closure and catharsis in response to the Holocaust, refuses to paint her father simply as a victim of a homophobic culture and era. She narrates:

Maybe I'm trying to render my senseless personal loss meaningful by linking it, however posthumously, to a more coherent narrative. A narrative of injustice, of sexual shame and fear, of life considered expendable. It's tempting to say that, in fact,

this *is* my father's story. There's a certain emotional expedience to claiming him as a tragic victim of homophobia. But that's a problematic line of thought. For one thing, it makes it harder for me to blame him. And for another, it leads to a peculiarly literal *cul de sac*. If my father had "come out" in his youth, if he had not met and married my mother... where would that leave me? (196-197).

Bechdel avoids a polemical response to her personal history. Although ardently and actively involved in the gay community,⁶ she does not turn her memoir into a reductive or didactic call for political action. She does not reduce her father's personality and his relationship with his family to his sexuality; she acknowledges the complexity of their situation and does not reduce it to its historical circumstances. His death, in any case, makes this predicament irresolvable through politics. However, she does use the narrative to revision her father's character and her relationship with him in a more positive light, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

The very educing of testimony, particularly of experiences of trauma, can be destructive. Joe Sacco, in his work of comics history *Footnotes in Gaza*, dwells on the complications involved in inducing others to bear witness as part of history-making. He sees his own role as historian-interviewer as having re-inflicted the trauma that he seeks to record, in encouraging the witnesses to testify. He conflates this role with the role of the Israeli soldiers who carried out massacres in Rafah and Khan Younis in 1956.

Abed and I came here to find out what happened on November 12, 1956, and now, arguably, we are the world's foremost experts. How often we forced the old men of Rafah back down this road lined with soldiers and strewn with shoes. How often we shoved the old men between the soldiers with sticks and through that gate. How often we made them sit with their heads down and piss on themselves. In the end, when we'd finished with them, we let them break down the wall and run home (383).

This sense of repeated violence through the inducement of testimony is also found in *Maus*. These confessional narratives equally involve a betrayal and a tribute. Bechdel exposes her family's most potentially humiliating and private secrets to public view, as well as scrutinizing her father's failings and her mother's unhappiness. Through the memoir's retelling of her

⁶ Both Bechdel the author and her *Fun Home* avatar: Bechdel authored the nationally published strip *Dykes to Watch Out For* from 1983 to 2008, and Alison is shown working on an AIDS article for the Gay Pride Issue of the *New York Native* in chapter seven.

parents' painful relationship, Bechdel reinflicts her father's humiliations and selfish and enraged behaviour upon her mother. Spiegelman becomes complicit in his father's suffering by educating his testimony and then profiting from it, a self-accusation which he articulates in the image of the pile of corpses his desk sits on in 'Auschwitz (Time Flies)' and in the subtitle *My Father Bleeds History*. If he does not metaphorically re-enact and re-perpetrate the murders of the Holocaust, the hyperbole of this image relays Spiegelman's sense of guilt and responsibility. He also paints his father in an unflattering light: Vladek's racism, his cheapness, his unhappy relationship with his second wife Mala, his failure to complete his grieving for Anja, and his destruction of her diaries are all detailed at damning length. Yet Bechdel also pays tribute to her father's love of literature and his support of her sexuality, and does not condemn him entirely; Spiegelman depicts his father as a kind of pragmatic, survivalist hero within Vladek's own narrative. The portrayal of Vladek's skills and resources that helped him remain alive through his fugitive period and the camps could turn the memoir into a tale of American exceptionalism, where the protagonist survives and prospers through graft, hard work and talent. However, the unattractive side of this generic narrative is addressed in Art's conversation with Pavel. When Art credits his father for being "amazingly present minded and resourceful" while in hiding and in the camps, Pavel, hunched over, with an accusing finger and a scowl, admonishes him: "Then you think it's admirable to survive. Does that mean it's NOT admirable to NOT survive?" (1992 45). Furthermore, the ending's ironic use of the generic convention of the lovers' reunion undermines a reading of the story as an Odyssean romantic quest. The chaos and random suffering of the Holocaust is emphasized in the face of the desire to fit its events neatly into a prescribed narrative genre. Bechdel sticks more closely to a Joycean *künstlerroman*. Her queer valorisation of masculinity propels her interest in drawing, particularly male athletes. Her literary inheritance from her father, and his own artistic ambitions, prompts her interest in writing. She plays with modernist conventions to create a postmodern narrative that simultaneously distances her from and unites her with her father and his artistic sensibility.

The importance and ubiquity of confession in contemporary and historical American culture is unavoidable. It stems from the U.S.A.'s evangelical and puritanical history, and the prominence of faiths which prioritise and value confession. The extramarital transgressions of politicians such as Bill Clinton, Eliot Spitzer, Mark Sanford et al have been publically addressed and

apologised for in press conferences, evidence that regardless of one's personal background, these confessions function as a theatrical playing out of a trope of American protestant history that anyone can adopt. Even though their transgression is part of their personal life and could be considered totally separate from their professional life, it is seen as necessary for the politicians to come out publicly and atone for their wrongdoing. Laura Miller's *Salon.com* review of Susan Wise Bauer's *The Art of the Grovel: Sexual Sin and Public Confession in America* discusses this phenomenon at length. Bauer, according to Miller, ties this practice of public confession to the tradition of evangelical Protestantism, and the way in which the act of public confession both absolves one of guilt and lends one the virtue of humility through the penance of shame. Miller notes the popularity of twelve-step-addiction programmes as well as the talk show model as late twentieth-century mediums for confession as absolution. The popularity of talk shows has become entrenched over the last 25 years: Oprah Winfrey, the chief proponent of contemporary public confessionalism ranked #1 alongside Michelle Obama and Irene Rosenfeld, the chief executive of Kraft Foods on Forbes's 2010 list of 'Most Powerful Women.'

Confession can be an acceptance of responsibility, and also a way of making order. If 'the truth' is out in the public eye, and if actors 'own' their actions, then the moral order remains intact and chaos is avoided. The belief that one possesses complete or adequate knowledge allows one to maintain a sense of control. In theory, forming traumatic experience through narrative gives it shape and allows it to be "processed", and yet this is not the case for Spiegelman. The idea of confession as cure and the popularity of talk therapy are hallmarks of North American culture. What is the purpose of confession? Is it something that humans are compelled to do, even if we know that it cannot or will not 'fix' us or work as a palliative? Is this a response that is founded in religion? Or is it a response to trauma? If trauma is the endless repetition of an event that was not fully experienced at the time, then perhaps confession is a way to fully integrate that original occurrence and be able to be absolved and not be compelled to repeat it any more. The fact that both authors' parents are dead, locked in time, unable to move on themselves, means that their children's confession might have a possibility of doing that for their parents, or for themselves.

Both authors move between modes of confession and testimony. Susannah Radstone defines the difference between testimony and confession as residing in the subject's agency and responsibility.

In testimony the subject is no longer in struggle with itself, but constitutes itself as innocent or 'done to' in relation to implicated other/s or events. In literary confession it is the subject's *own* violence or sexuality that troubles the narrator. In witness testimony it is the violence or sexuality of another, or the shock of an event, that disturbs the witness. In literary theory it is the split between the narrator and the subject of confession that 'troubles' the confessional text, whereas the object of study of testimony criticism is the 'traceless text' (Elsaesser 2001: 199) that results from the unrepresentability or unrememberability of traumatic events or actions (Gill 170).

This model can be neatly applied to different sections of Bechdel and Spiegelman's texts. Vladek's Shoah narrative is clearly testimony: his own role is semi-heroic and largely blameless, and the 'troubling' elements are the atrocities committed by agents of National Socialism. The 'unrepresentability' of his testimony is reflected in the animal heads of the characters, and the cartoon style of the art. Artie confesses to his own impatience and selfishness in his relationship with his father, his inadequacy in writing about events which he did not witness, and his artistic exploitation of the victims of the Holocaust. Bechdel's narrative both testifies to Bruce's failings as a father and husband, and confesses to Alison's own complicity in her father's transgressive desires and artistic interest, and to her inability to represent the past authoritatively and with complete accuracy.

Jo Gill's introduction to *Modern Confessional Writing* describes confession as

not a means of expressing the irrepressible truth of prior lived experience, but a ritualized technique for producing truth.... It is not the free expression of the self but an effect of an ordered regime by which the self begins to conceive of itself as individual, responsible, culpable and thereby confessional. Most importantly, confession takes place in a context of power, and prohibition, and surveillance. It is generated and sustained not by the troubled subject/confessant, but by the discursive relationship between speaker and reader (confessant and confessor) (4).

Alison and Art act as both their fathers' confessors, and as confessants to the reader as they admit their own failings and inadequacies in their own lives and in this former role. They do so in the absence of their fathers as confessors. Spiegelman and particularly Bechdel demonstrate a desire to confess to and be absolved by one's father. The graphics of the failed father-daughter connection in the coming out scene in the car in *Fun Home* suggest the dynamics of

the confessional booth (the Bechdels are, at least nominally, Catholics). And just as the role of parent and child shift and slide over the course of the conversation, so do the roles of confessor and confessant. This failed confession and communion prompts Bruce's confession by proxy and Alison's own confession. While Vladek testifies to Art, Art confesses his own inadequacy to the reader. He cannot testify to his father's suffering, but the effects of post-memory trauma compel him to pass this testimony on.

Spiegelman tells his father's story as testimony and his own as confession. Confession is more complicated than testimony: there is an implication of guilt, responsibility and agency. The 'Auschwitz (Time Flies)' chapter functions as Art's own confession. The chapter's frame-shattering meta-commentary is announced by the image of Art at his desk, with a human head, wearing a mouse mask. This image of the mask functions as a puncturing device to the photographs discussed in chapter one, "eject[ing] the reader from the complacency of the animal metaphor and point[ing] to both its artifice and its effectiveness as a normalized aesthetic device" (McGlothlin). Spiegelman has described this chapter as separate from the normal time scheme of the 1970s narrative, commenting that "we're moving closer to a present where there are people, so that these masks are more obviously masks than ever before" (*The Complete Maus*). This commentary fits with Marianne Hirsch's reading that Spiegelman's "representational choices are just that – choices – and that identities are assumed rather than given.... If Jews are mice and Germans are cats, then, they seem to be so not immutably but only *in relation to each other* and in relation to the Holocaust and its memory. They are human but for the predator/victim relationships between them" (13).

The continuation of the animal heads metaphor in the 1970s narrative reflects the ongoing legacy of the Holocaust, and the continuing role of race in culture and society. The horror of the Holocaust should not occlude our attention to other and ongoing kinds of racism. And yet the obvious masks on all the characters in the 'Time Flies' chapter seems to be closer to a commentary on the constructed nature of comics and the assumed roles one takes inside of one's 'race' and culture, rather than a commentary on a positive change in society. If anything, the masks reflect that 'Time Flies' is the most overt ethical discussion of responsibility and violence in the book. It stages itself as a removal of artifice while still acknowledging its own construction: Art literally shrinks and grows between adult and child size, and the animal heads are still worn as masks. While Art, the journalists, and Pavel all wear masks, the corpses in the

pile of bodies under Art's desk have actual mouse heads. The identities of survivors and those who did not go through the Holocaust are ironically and socially conveyed in comparison to the authentic experience of those who died. Staub acknowledges this anti-essentialist view of identity but allows that

Maus also takes seriously the way marginalized peoples not only often rely on group identity to survive, but also have every right to celebrate their specialness and differences from the dominant culture. But – and this is the key issue – *Maus* clearly suggests that that [sic] identity can never be understood as self-evident; *Maus* works continually to disrupt comfortable assumptions about where the differences between people lie (38).

Confession is defined by J.M. Coetzee “as distinct from the *memoir* and the *apology*, on the basis of an underlying motive to tell an essential truth about the self” (252). He suggests that the confessant’s motivation is “that *end of the chapter* whose attainment is the goal of confession” (253). Radstone proffers a similar view, suggesting that “criticism of many perspectives concurs that confession is nevertheless a fundamentally intra-subjective discourse aimed at achieving self-transformation and an end to self-scrutiny by confessing the past” (Gill 175). Yet Bechdel and especially Spiegelman’s confessions and confessions-by-proxy do not provide this desired resolution. Coetzee argues that “Self-forgiveness means the closing of the chapter, the end of the downward spiral of self-accusation whose depths can never be plumbed because to decide to stop at any point by an act of will, to decide that guilt ceases at such-and-such a point, is itself a potentially false act that deserves its own scrutiny” (290). Art’s cycle of self-recrimination is evident in his shrinking to child-sized impotence in ‘Auschwitz (Time Flies)’, growing under the guidance of Pavel and then again regressing as he listens to a recording of himself ignoring his father’s marital griping and repeatedly, angrily imploring “Let’s get back to Auschwitz” (1992 47). Cvetkovich argues that “Alison’s ‘compulsive propensity to autobiography’ (140) suggests that witnessing can be the sign of emotional distress as much as its cure.” This is also pertinent in relation to *Maus*, where the acts of witnessing and testimony are necessary and urgent and yet resolve nothing. The subtitle of the first volume is *My Father Bleeds History*, suggesting that the act of giving testimony is traumatic in itself. The multiplicity of both memoirs’ endings, particularly Spiegelman’s, deal with this problem. There is little absolution for these confessors. The original confessants, the

fathers, are dead, and therefore, particularly Bruce Bechdel, unredeemed by the confession. With their multiple endings, the confessions are never quite complete.

Spiegelman has attributed the popularity of confessional, autobiographical comics to Justin Green's 1978 *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary*, declaring that "Justin profoundly changed the history of comix. He turned comic book boxes into intimate secular confession booths" ('Symptoms of Disorder' 94). One can see this trend in the success of not only Bechdel and Spiegelman, but in the autobiographical works of Robert Crumb, Phoebe Gloeckner, Linda Barry, Seth, Craig Thompson and David Small. *Binky Brown* is an autobiographical comic which focuses on the child and adolescent Binky's Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, sexual awakening and fraught relationship with the Catholic Church. In his introductory 'A Confession to my Readers,' a bound and tortured Green, drawing with a pen between his teeth, identifies his motivation as the desire

to purge [himself] of the compulsive neurosis which [he has] served since [he] officially left Catholicism... [His] justification for undertaking this task is that many others are slaves to their neuroses. Maybe if they read about one neurotic's dilemma in easy-to-understand comic-book format these tormented folks will no longer see themselves as mere food-tubes living in isolation (ii).

Coetzee's 'end of the chapter,' as well as a therapeutic release, are clearly desired by Green. However, potential therapeutic value is not a universal point of analysis for autobiographical works. Spiegelman specifically denies the idea of art (and by extension art as stylized confession) as therapeutic or healing in a 2008 *New York Magazine* interview: "therapy is vomiting things up. Art is about eating your own vomit. There's a therapeutic aspect to all making, but the nature of working is to compress, condense, and shape stuff, not to just expunge it. It's not just an exorcism" (Milzoff). Both the stylization and the other-directed nature of art disassociate it from a simplistic reading as a curative purgation. Confessional texts function in more complex ways than this: the reader finds a straightforward pleasure in the disclosure of hidden narratives, but the cause for shame that propels the need for confession reveals borderlines of transgression. The central sources of shame in the two books are not found in the violent suffering of millions or a middle-aged man's sexual transgressions (although these are certainly important roots of shame, but the authors are not directly complicit and so can detach themselves from these actions), but in the authors' inappropriate

responses to these events. Artie feels ashamed at his father's failure to be a noble representative of survival, free of racism, parsimony and self-centredness, and Spiegelman is disappointed by his own intolerance of his father's limitations. Bechdel's considerably more mediated shame lies in her feelings of complicity in and lack of censure of her father for taking advantage of teenage boys and his betrayal of his family. She dwells at length on her inability to produce a socially acceptable emotional response to her father's death: Alison is barely able to cry and often yields to nervous laughter.

Secular confession has its ur-text in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions*. Rousseau claims that the proof of his honesty and lack of secrecy lies in the more embarrassing details of his narrative:

There is no vice of character whose disclosure it is not easier to make than that of a black or base action, and one may be certain that anyone who dares to admit to such an action will admit everything. Here is the harsh but sure proof of my sincerity. I will speak the truth; I will do so unreservedly; I will tell everything; the good, the bad, everything, in short (647).

Spiegelman assumes this tactic, characterizing his avatar as sulky, impatient, self-absorbed, depressed and profiting from the suffering of others. Early in *My Father Bleeds History*, Artie promises Vladek that he won't report the story of Vladek's relationship with Lucia, the girlfriend before Anja, because Vladek feels that it is not "so proper, so respectful.... such **private** things, I don't want you should mention" (1986 23). Artie's character is self-deprecatingly undermined in this admission of a betrayal, and the inclusion of this tabooed information creates an appearance of full disclosure. The entire device of the testimonial meta-narrative suggests that what is represented to the reader is 'all' there is to be represented, whilst also implicitly revealing the constructed process of the testimony. Bechdel is less self-deprecating but does include some personal and potentially mildly embarrassing material (her childhood and youthful masturbation habits, her struggles with OCD). She of course discusses the fallibility of memory and all representation, as well as her own bias (as explored in chapter one). It is this admission of her own potential unreliability as a narrator and prejudiced authority that functions as the 'unrestrained' concession of humiliating faults which creates an inverted sense of trust in the reader. She acknowledges that her version of her family history is not uncontestable, and this humility draws the reader further into her confidence.

In *Maus II*, Spiegelman confesses, but he comes from a blend of first generation American culture and the immigrant Jewish culture of his parents. His 'confession' will not absolve him of his

wrongdoing. The articulation of his participation in his father's suffering and his profiting from his recording of the Holocaust is necessary, but he is not purified through this confession. Even after Artie's talk therapy with Pavel, where he is able to 'grow' back into an adult size, he again shrinks and regresses into childhood while listening to the tapes and hearing his aggressive demands on his father – "Let's get back to Auschwitz... **ENOUGH! TELL ME ABOUT AUSCHWITZ!**" (47). The happy ending of Anja and Vladek's reunion is undermined by the unhappiness of the rest of their lives. Spiegelman's signature is "buried" by his dead parents. Art's identity is occluded by his misnaming as Richieu. The book ends with the end of the testimony, but Art is despondent and impotent. The weight of the Holocaust is such that there is no cure; nothing will alleviate or absolve suffering and guilt. Confession will not bring an 'end to the chapter', nor is it "palliative or reformatory" (McGill 5). Yet Art is still compelled to

confess and present his father's testimony by proxy. As a second generation survivor, the trauma continues to be repeated through narrative and yet this narrative, being without an immediate personal

referent for Art, offers no relief.

In *Fun Home*, on the other hand, confession is seen more hopefully, but not as all-redemptive. Bruce's attempt at confession in coming out to Alison is abbreviated and not entirely successful. The choice of a series of tight and black-backgrounded 'talking head' panels, twelve to a page, to chronicle this conversation is a distinct break from the graphic style of the rest of the book. The lack of major differences between the panels forces the reader to concentrate on the tiny changes in Alison and Bruce's expressions and on the words of their conversation. The claustrophobia evoked in the reader by the narrowness and darkness of the repeated panels – the staccato grammar of their frequency and repetition – echoes Alison's own tension and stress during this conversation. The narrator states "I kept still, like he was a splendid deer I didn't want to startle" (220). The art in the moment of confession reflects the conversation's loaded nature. Its darkness and smallness mirror the ultimately disappointing and abortive nature of the conversation. The narrator notes, as Bruce stares blankly forward, and Alison alternatively looks out of the window and at her feet, with disappointment and restraint, "It was not the sobbing, joyous reunion of Odysseus and Telemachus. It was more like fatherless Stephen and sonless Bloom... ..having their equivocal late-night cocoa at 7 Eccles Street. But which of us was the father? I had felt distinctly parental listening to his shamefaced recitation. And all too soon we were at the theatre" (221). Although Bruce's attempts at confession are represented as failing to heal, Alison's 'confession' on behalf of Bruce, and of herself and her family – the book itself – looks to a more positive, healing action. However, subsequent to the book's publication, Bechdel has commented that this desired end did not occur: "I had this fantasy that this book was going to heal us and bring us all together. I was going to tell the truth and everything would be out in the open.... That didn't happen" (Brockes).

Both books discuss the idea of the good reader and the adequate confessor, and both of these roles are continually called into question. Artie is not an adequate confessor: in the 'turn left' panels (1992 58) Artie with his tape recorder is conflated with Dr. Mengele and his clipboard, and in the final panel of the memoir, he stands dejectedly holding his tape recorder as Vladek rejects any further narration and obfuscates Artie's identity as he calls him Richieu. Vladek's reading of his own situation is also called into question, as well as his authority as a narrator and testifier. He often smooths over awkward or questioned points in his narrative, such as the date of Richieu's conception and the presence of an orchestra at Auschwitz. As Spiegelman

has pointed out in an interview, the question is not so much of intentional deception or veracity, but rather “what did he understand of what he experienced, what did he tell of what he understood, what did I understand of what he told, and what do I tell?” (Weschler 71). Vladek and Artie battle over the reading of his story. Bruce is an avid and highbrow reader, and yet he has not read all the books in his library and tries to force certain readings of texts onto Alison, such as when he insists that she identify with Joyce. He is also associated with untruth and deception throughout the book, as opposed to Alison’s erotic truth. *Fun Home* is performative as an assertion of Alison’s erotic truth. Both books can be read as gestures against silence and lies. Bechdel moves against her father’s deception and Spiegelman rejects his mother’s silence specifically and the general relative silence that he encountered surrounding the Holocaust in the 1970s and 80s. He claims he “was able to do all my research [on the Holocaust] in about three months. There wasn’t that much to read” (Juno 167)⁷. Furthermore, Bechdel has suggested that the production of the narrative itself is a form of atonement, perhaps for this history of sexual shame as well as for her betrayal of her family’s privacy: “in another way, the book is an expansion of my childhood diary, in that it’s this perseverance on detail. You know? In some ways I felt like it was almost a penance to trace everything out in such detail” (Chute 2006).

Maus investigates conflicts between differing versions of events and the issue of mediated testimony and imperfect memory. A prisoner in Auschwitz who

claims to be German is visually depicted as both Jewish and German. In the first two panels

⁷ This assertion from an interview conducted in 1997 is contradicted by earlier statements given in a 1988 article, where Spiegelman is quoted as saying “This is a bottomless pit of reading if one falls into the area. There’s building after building of books and documents. I don’t pretend [to have read them all]” (Brown 93). However, Brown does contextualise the latter statement as referring to “the changing and political climate of Sosnowiec, and... the context of Poland and the Third Reich” (93) rather than the Holocaust specifically.

depicting him, he is mouse-headed. He is shown appealing to the guards that he has “medals from the Kaiser! My **son** is a German soldier!” while gesticulating with one hand in the air and the other earnestly pressed to his heart (1992 50). In the next panel, his gesture and expression are repeated, but this time he is drawn as a shadowy cat. Shortly after this episode, Vladek contradicts Artie’s research-based knowledge of the orchestra at the Auschwitz gates (1992 54). Spiegelman concedes to Vladek’s denial of it insofar as he draws the marchers obscuring the orchestra’s position in the second image, but he protests by including his own comment – “it’s very well documented” (54) – and still shows the tops of the orchestra’s instruments appearing over the prisoners’ heads. Bechdel does not challenge her own memory in this way, which in part may be attributed to her heavy reliance on documentary evidence

from her childhood. She imagines various situations from her parents’ youth and early relationship, but otherwise the only doubled iteration of an event is Alison’s fantasy of speaking ‘the truth’ at her father’s funeral. She firstly scornfully tells a consoling guest that her father “**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**” (125). In the subsequent ‘truthful’ representation of the event, she blandly responds to his suggestion that “the Lord moves in mysterious ways” with “yes. He does” (125). Bechdel is obviously concerned with accurately and truthfully representing an authentic past, as she discusses in her remembrance of her childhood OCD. But the immediacy of her own memories, as compared to Spiegelman’s second hand testimony, stave off this extra dimension of doubt.

The rage and dysfunction that characterise Bruce at the beginning of *Fun Home* are elided over the course of the book. He becomes more and more passive (as well as passive-aggressive) and simply distanced. His final representation is as tragic and yet supportive of Alison. Bechdel claims him as both her biological and spiritual father. In the last three pages of the book – the pool scene – Bruce is drawn either from a level angle or else from above, which contrasts with

the menacing low angles which he is drawn from early in the book. His usual facial expressions of bored indifference or anger here mellow into casual warmth and a near smile, tinged with concern for and concentration on his daughter's wellbeing. His death is rendered not as chaotic and violent as it historically was, but calm, controlled, beneficent. Bechdel has commented "I think it's part of my father's brilliance, the fact that his death was so ambiguous... The idea that he could pull that off. That it was his last great wheeze. I want to believe that he went out triumphantly" (Burkeman).

The beginning of the memoir establishes the complexities and contradictions of Bruce's character, and emphasizes his cruelty and alienation from his family. The rest of the book works to make him more sympathetic. The most troubling features of Bruce's personality and life are swiftly demonstrated and then dispatched. This means that readers will have begun to forget these faults by the end and be more likely to accept the gentler image of Bruce that closes the book. However, by setting out the facts of the story at the beginning of the narrative, the reader is thereafter removed from a position of innocence. Their knowledge of the Bechdel family's secrets taints the reading of the rest of the narrative. The family's tragedy haunts every panel, and any possibility of connection between Alison and Bruce is shadowed by a sense of dread leading to his early death. This foreshadowing is introduced on the memoir's first page by depicting Bruce reading *Anna Karenina*, with its famous first line, and is confirmed on the second, with the statement "it was not me but my father who was to plummet from the sky" (4).

Bruce Bechdel himself cannot be saved: he is dead. Nevertheless, the revisioning of his death as a suicide and the reverse narration which establishes the accomplished artist and writer Bechdel's creative and literary debt to him function as a kind of redemption. Bechdel had a Catholic upbringing (as the Bechdels pose for a family snapshot, her mother complains "Mass will be over before we get there" (16)). The final image in the book, of a young Alison jumping into a body of water with her father holding out his arms to receive her, recalls images of baptism. Baptism itself implies cleansing, purification, and becoming a fully realised person. This final image connects back to a panel in Chapter One, where Bruce is depicted hunched, carrying a wooden pillar over his shoulder, echoing illustrations of Christ carrying the cross through Jerusalem. The allusion is solidified by Bechdel's commentary that historical

restoration was “his passion. And I mean passion in every sense of the word. Libidinal. Manic. Martyred” (7).

In his audio commentary for *The Complete Maus* CD-Rom, Spiegelman articulates his struggles with representation and stylization:

The word ‘Holocaust’ means ‘burnt offering,’ as if somehow the people who died in the concentration camps were martyrs, as if their death had some meaning, and that seems to me a horrible abuse of their suffering. It seemed to me that the best thing I could do is just try to record and explain what I could understand without trying to offer interpretation beyond the one that’s implicit in universalising with these masks in giving a very specific story. It was pointed out to me in an article by Adam Gopnik that appeared after *Maus I* came out that the animal heads were reminiscent of a medieval bird’s head Haggadah which was meant to illustrate the story of Passover without showing people since religious Jewish belief includes a strain that says one can’t draw people because it’s a reflection of drawing God. To show something that’s too holy to show, Medieval artists resorted to animals, and that similarly in *Maus*, there is an attempt to find something that is too profane to show directly, and masking it allowed that to happen.

Although it is disingenuous of Spiegelman to claim that his work – and particularly his animal metaphor – carries no interpretation beyond making his father’s story more relatable, there is a clear ethical consideration of the implications of imposing a narrative and symbolic (specifically redemptive) meaning on the events of the Shoah. Spiegelman suggests that the use of a masking metaphor mitigates the pain and immediacy of the Holocaust, and that by implication, there would be something unethical about representing the camps too directly. This technique is also seen in the depiction of the swastika. Although the swastika can be clearly seen on the armbands of the S.S. guards in the camps, whenever it is used stylistically, in the background or as part of the characters’ environment, it is partially obscured or distorted. After the Spiegelmans see a swastika for the first time, rippling on a flag in a Czech town, the persecution of the Czech Jews is depicted in a series of four panels, each with the swastika as the backdrop. In each panel, the swastika is partially covered by images of anti-Semitic violence.

Later, as Vladek and Anja travel through the Polish countryside, hiding from the Nazi authorities, their path is depicted as a swastika (125; 135). Furthermore, the white disc or iris is

often repeated, suggesting both the nostalgic romanticism of memory (much like the glamourizing perspective of an old film) and the white disc that borders the swastika in Nazi iconography, as well as spotlights used in show business and those used by Nazis while hunting Jews, in the camps, and at rallies. It can be seen behind Vladek and Anja as they dance at the sanatorium, both gilding the memory in romance and allure, and foreshadowing their suffering under National Socialism. The same technique is used for both of Vladek and Anja's reunions, firstly after he returns from his P.O.W. camp, and secondly at the end of the

narrative. The lovers' embrace is set both times against this iris. The background symbolizes the traditional and generic romance of their relationship, but also the inescapable trauma of their war experience. The circle suggests that their love is perpetual, but so is the traumatic legacy of their history. The mediated use of the swastika calls into question the ethics of representing this symbol of fascism and genocidal hatred. Spiegelman is subversively and symbolically deflating the swastika by depicting it visually in this way. It is used metonymically to represent the entire Nazi regime and environment.⁸

The extremities of the Holocaust and the implications of Nazi ideology and discourse forced people into specific identity categories. The animal heads metaphor reflects that in this position, these people then acted in ways that were prescribed by the violence and extremity of the situation. Jews were forced to be identified as 'Jews,' regardless of their own religious or cultural practice or belief or self-identification. They were forced to move only by night, to live off scraps, to hide in attics, cellars, bunkers and barns. However, this reading does not work on all levels: Spiegelman does not suggest that the Poles acted 'piggishly' (selfishly, greedily, without compassion) and the characterisation of gypsies/Roma as gypsy moths, the French as

⁸ Adolf Hitler describes his rationale for the symbolism of the swastika in the Nazi flag in *Mein Kampf*: "We National Socialists regarded our flag as being the embodiment of our party programme. The red expressed the social thought underlying the movement. White the national thought. And the swastika signified the mission allotted to us--the struggle for the victory of Aryan mankind and at the same time the triumph of the ideal of creative work which is in itself and always will be anti-Semitic."

frogs, the Swedish as reindeer and the English as fish seems purely whimsical and based on the most tenuous of linguistic cultural stereotypes. Despite some readers' belief that the depiction of Poles with pig heads is bigoted, Spiegelman is continuing his explosion of Nazi metaphors that he uses for his mouse-headed Jews. On a more superficial level, pigs are a staple of animal cartoons in America as much as mice and cats and dogs are, and pigs are "not part of the book's overriding metaphorical food chain. Pigs don't eat mice – cats do" (Spiegelman in Weschler 232). Moreover, just as his epigraphs show that Nazi ideology painted the Jews as vermin ("The Jews are undoubtedly a race, but they are not human," and "Away with Jewish brutalization of the people! Down with Mickey Mouse! Wear the Swastika Cross!"), this discourse portrayed Poles as swine. In the same interview, Spiegelman recounts an anecdote where a Polish visa officer questioned the pig metaphor, offering the information that "'Swine, you see, is what the Nazis called the Poles.' ... [Spiegelman] didn't make up these metaphors, the Nazis did" (ibid).

Spiegelman articulates his motivation for employing Nazi metaphors in the audio commentary to *The Complete Maus CD-ROM*:

The entire Nazi project, the final solution, ended up dividing humanity into various species so that there were *ubermenschen*, *untermenschen* and what was involved was the extermination of the Jews. Extermination is a word reserved for vermin. It's not what happens to people, what happens to people is they get murdered. I found that the gas that was used in Auschwitz was Zyklon B, a pesticide. I found that in a film called *The Eternal Jew*, a racist documentary made by a guy named Hippler, there's shots of old Jewish men milling around in the ghetto, cut to a swarm of rats in a sewer and saying that the Jews are the rats of mankind carrying their disease throughout the world.

Spiegelman employs this widespread anti-Semitic metaphor in order to contest and complicate it. The metaphor deliberately implodes over the course of the narrative. Anja is afraid of rats in the cellar where she and Vladek are hiding in *Maus I* (147); Nazi dogs guard the gates of Auschwitz (157); Art teasingly comments on Pavel's framed photo of his cat and mentions his "stray dogs and cats," wondering if he "can mention this, or does it completely louse up [his] metaphor?" (43). Spiegelman's treatment of his animal metaphor takes Nazi discourse to its furthest logical end to demonstrate its absurdity, showing the limitations and fallibility of

‘taxonomically’ dividing humans into immutable ethnic groupings, and the paucity and misanthropy of eugenics and racism.⁹ The metaphor alludes to animal fables, as well as the ‘funny animal’ (a proto-*Maus* comic, ‘Maus,’ was originally commissioned and published in the Justin Green edited collection *Funny Animals* (sic)) comics and cartoon tradition in America, probably most famously in both Loony Tunes and Disney cartoons. This referencing highlights the absurd horror of the Holocaust through bathos. Furthermore, the animal cartoons motif obliquely refers to the early racism of some animal cartoons. Spiegelman has suggested that Mickey Mouse was originally an animal analogue for a minstrel character: “Mice are kinda seen as ‘happy darkies,’ if you’ll pardon the expression. The way blacks were portrayed in these early cartoons and the way mice are portrayed are almost identical: uh, singing and dancing, playing, not being adults with responsibilities” (Graham Smith 90).

Racist slander is not the only kind of verbal violence possible. The implicitly aggressive act of representing others and speaking on their behalf (particularly those who are still living) can be read as a form of imperialism. It is an appropriation of another’s voice. Janet Malcolm initially despatches this ethical quandary in her exploration of the biographical wars over Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes, *The Silent Woman*. She stridently and scornfully states

as everyone knows who has ever heard a piece of gossip, we do not “own” the facts of our lives at all. This ownership passes out of our hands at birth, at the moment we are first observed.... The concept of privacy is a sort of screen to hide the fact that almost none is possible in a social universe (8).

However, she later changes direction, or at least complicates her earlier statement, by describing the biographer as “like the professional burglar, breaking into a house, rifling through certain drawers that he has good reason to think contain the jewellery and money, and triumphantly bearing his loot away” (9). This ethical condemnation aligns with her famous opening lines of *The Journalist and the Murderer*: “Every journalist who is not too stupid or too full of himself to notice what is going on knows that what he does is morally indefensible. He is

⁹ Stereotyping is also explored in the characterisation of Vladek. *Maus* details at length Vladek’s kvetching about Mala’s perceived failings as a wife, his obsessive strategies to save money, his hoarding and his criticisms of Artie’s supposed extravagance and laziness. Artie worries to Mala that “in some ways he’s just like the racist caricature of the miserly old Jew” (1986 131). It is the mixture of positive and negative qualities – pragmatic survivalism, racism and miserliness – that make Vladek complex and variable enough for the reader to respond to his humanity. This has the opposite effect from that of the grossly limiting, adverse and one-dimensional Nazi typing of Jewish vermin and Polish swine.

a kind of confidence man, preying on people's vanity, ignorance, or loneliness, gaining their trust and betraying them without remorse" (3). While the biographer and journalist are exploitative and unethical characters, the subject is defenceless and implicated in their own exposure simply by having lived in the company of others. Spiegelman and Bechdel's positions are obviously more complex than those of the journalist or professional biographer. They are subjects in – if not *the* subject of - their own stories, and their families were aware of their biographical projects. However, they are both conscious of the exploitation involved in writing about others, even those whom one has consulted and (especially) those whom one knows personally and well. Subsequent to the publication of *Fun Home*, Bechdel has commented on the personal ramifications about this kind of invasive verbal violence:

I've discovered that there's something inherently hostile about having someone else write about your life, no matter how well-intentioned that other person might be... It violates their subjectivity. That's the really awful thing about this book: I made my mother and my brothers objects in my version of this story.... Somehow I assumed I had their tacit permission... but that wasn't true. You can't get someone's permission if you don't ask for it, and I didn't want to ask for it because I was afraid they wouldn't give it.... My mother comes from a different generation. She really believes that people should shut up (Burkeman).

The silencing of another's voice occurs in *Maus* with Vladek's burning of Anja's diaries, and his claim to speak for her. When Artie again brings up the subject of Anja's lost diaries, at the end of *Maus I*, suggesting "This is where Mom's diaries will be **especially** useful. They'll give me some idea of what she went through while you were apart," Vladek dismisses the notion, stating "I can tell you... she went through the same what me: **terrible!**" (158). Of course, he cannot definitively recount Anja's experiences for her, and this is in part a stalling tactic to avoid the revelation that he has in fact burnt Anja's diaries, rather than just losing them somewhere in the house. However, his dismissal of the possibility of divergence in their experience is an instance of his silencing of her voice. There is a clear tension between the ethics of representing another's voice (Artie's collaborative and testimonial representation of Vladek's) and the appropriation of another's (both Vladek and Art of Anja's), particularly in the context of the Holocaust, the vast silencing of around 6 million individual voices and the voice of a varied international culture and ethnicity (along with the 5-11 million non-Jews murdered). The theme of personal experience being used to comparatively overwhelm and silence other

voices is introduced in the prologue to *Maus I*. Vladek is scornful and dismissive of Artie's experience and suffering, viewing his son's perspective as irrelevant and pampered. He stifles Artie's complaints with his own hyperbolic comparison of suffering in hiding from the SS. Vladek silences Artie's own pain and experience with his own, deeming it as lacking perspective and trivial, and therefore worthless.

Bruce's closeted sexuality – the lie of his perfectly restored home and his nuclear family – is implicitly contrasted with Bechdel's own act of confession in outing her father and writing *Fun Home* itself. The flawless restoration of the family home is both an expression of and a metaphor for Bruce Bechdel's hidden sexuality: "His shame inhabited our house as pervasively and invisibly as the aromatic musk of aging mahogany. In fact, the meticulous, period interiors were expressly designed to conceal it" (20). Alison's father's art is anti-referential, explicitly false: "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). Bruce Bechdel's artifice, in his assumed identity as a provincial family man, and above all in the spectacular metaphor of his immaculately restored period home, is at odds with the apparent honesty of *Fun Home's* remembrances. Although *Fun Home* does not give a clear moral judgment of either this passion for formal embellishment or Bruce's own artifice, they are associated with deceit and lies. Bechdel compares her father with Daedalus, who "too, was indifferent to the human cost of his projects" (11). Continuing the theme of binary opposition between Alison and Bruce which runs throughout the book, Bechdel states: "I developed a contempt for useless ornament. What function was served by the scrolls, tassels and bric-a-brac that infested our house? If anything, they obscured function. They were embellishments in the worst sense. They were lies. My father began to seem morally suspect to me long before I knew that he actually had a dark secret" (16). Although Bechdel's childhood rejection of embellishment is reflected in her pared back colour palette, her elegant language, sophisticated lexicon and detailed drawings reflect her artistic inheritance from her father.

When Bechdel discusses her early childhood queer identification, she suggests that, along with her father, "I'd been lying too, for a long time. Since I was four or five" (117). Silence in the face of all this deception and hidden shame would be a continuation of these lies; silence is "the implicit lie of the blank page" (186). This has clear political ramifications. Bechdel cites

Adrienne Rich in her 'Cartoonist's Introduction' to *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For*, excerpting the following pertinent passage:

Whatever is unnamed, undepicted in images, whatever is omitted from biography, censored in collections of letters, whatever is misnamed as something else, made difficult-to-come-by, whatever is buried in the memory by the collapse of meaning under an inadequate or lying language – this will become, not merely unspoken, but *unspeakable* (x).

Rich elaborates on the political importance of outspokenness and naming of sexuality in 'It is the Lesbian in Us': "For us, the process of naming and defining is not an intellectual game, but a grasping of our experience and a key to action. The word *lesbian* must be affirmed because to discard it is to collaborate with silence and lying about our very existence; with the closet-game, the creation of the *unspeakable*" (202). Bechdel takes a pragmatic approach to sexual identity. Although she focuses strongly on her and her father's performance of gender through their taste in clothing and differing aesthetic tastes, she casts at least her own queerness as innate. When the four-year-old Alison sees a "truck-driving bulldyke" in a diner, Bechdel narrates

I didn't know that there were women who wore men's clothes and had men's haircuts. But like a traveller in a foreign country who runs into someone from home—someone they've never spoken to, but know by sight—I recognized her with a surge of joy (118).

Despite these movements between positions of construction and essentialism with regards to identity, it is nonetheless true that, as Judith Butler states, "To claim that gender is constructed is not to assert its illusoriness or artificiality, where those terms are understood to reside within a binary that counterposes the 'real' and the 'authentic' as oppositional" (45). In a world where Bruce Bechdel and his family's lives have been terribly – even fatally – affected by his silence around his sexuality, clear and open claiming of one's sexuality is a morally correct act. Spiegelman too makes a moral association with truth and disclosure. Upon discovering that his father has burnt his mother's diaries, he calls him a murderer twice. This echoes Artie's earlier accusation of his dead and self-silenced mother in 'Prisoner on the Hell Planet' of having "committed the perfect crime... **you** put me here... shorted all my circuits... cut my nerve endings... and crossed my wires! ...You **murdered** me Mommy, and you left me here to take the rap!!!" (103). His survivor parents' acts of silencing are figured as acts of murder, extreme

moral transgressions. Yet Artie's vocalising is not without ethical complication. In 'Time Flies' he accuses himself of both inadequacy and profiteering from victims' suffering. His discussion with Pavel on the value of speech and silence towards the Holocaust remains open-ended, with Beckett's performatively paradoxical statement, "Every word is like an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness" as the only movement towards an answer (45). Levine comments that

Art does not so much refute Beckett's dictum as draw attention to the contradictory *necessity* of its being formulated in just this way, for it seems that the words which he and Beckett cannot help but speak do not so much break the silence as make it strangely palpable.... the speakers' words function here as stains marking a silence they resolutely refuse to fill in for (79).

Spiegelman does not attempt to fill his mother's silence, or that of the millions of victims. Instead, he represents his father's testimony and leaves these other silences intact. His recognition of his own faults as a narrator, and of the highly mediated and partial nature of any history, does not attempt to render the trauma of the Holocaust as meaningful or resolvable. The paradoxes and aporia of his father's story remain, but the narration of his experience is a necessary, not an impossible, act.

Chapter Three

Never Again and Again and Again: Recursive Time and Present Absence

In 1994, Spiegelman began to collaborate with the Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C. on an exhibition about the crisis in Bosnia, after having rejected suggestions for a *Maus* exhibition (Jacobowitz 158; Juno 174-175). Spiegelman's involvement in the planned exhibit did not come to fruition, but his proposed names for the show cast light upon the treatment of time and trauma in his own body of work. The first title was 'Genocide Now'; after its rejection as too controversial, he suggested 'Never Again and Again and Again', a title which I have borrowed for this chapter. 'Never Again and Again and Again' immediately points to the inadequacy and hypocrisy of piously memorializing the Holocaust while ignoring other more current genocides. However, it also can be read in light of the way in which, for survivors of trauma, the past is not past. In both *Maus* and *Fun Home*, past and present refuse to stay neatly segregated, and yet they are still divided by an unbridgeable gap. In *Maus*, the interplay between the primary and secondary narratives interrogates the way in which the present informs the construction of the remembered past, and the way in which the traumatic past insinuates its presence into the present. Graphically, the past and present often overlap, and various strategies are used to convey the way in which trauma demands that the past be relived, again and again in the present. *Fun Home*'s non-linear and recursive timeline repeatedly returns to central traumatic moments and images. Bechdel's "tricky reverse narration" dodges and weaves through her childhood relationship with her father, jumping across time to connect with a thematically or symbolically linked moment in order to track the complicated parallels between her father's identity and her own (232).

Both texts are meditations on memory, narrating the past from the muddled and complicit perspective of the present. Richard Glejzer argues that "Spiegelman opens up the very moment of memory's constitution, a moment that precedes the testimony that forms the substance of his text.... *Maus* presents us with the relation between event and knowledge, between seeing and understanding, exposing the trauma that functions as a locus of force" (129). Vladek's account of the past is coloured by his situation at the moment of narration, as discussed later in this chapter. The doubled testimony – Vladek's inside Artie's – shows the ways in which

testifying and being the witness to his father's narrative are traumas for Vladek and Artie, as well as the original trauma of the Holocaust itself. LaCapra argues that *Maus'* interrogations of memory and history are part of Artie's quest to retrospectively make sense of his traumatic childhood, and his role, as Pavel puts it, as "the real survivor" (1992 44).

Through *Maus* Spiegelman works out a multifaceted and layered memory of the past that is continually questioned and riven by contemporary concerns, thus raising the question of the extent to which past and present are inextricably interwoven through belated effects and partial recognitions – notably the insistent quest of the son for knowledge of the father's traumatic experience of a lost world.... both father and son are constrained to try to relate past and present without letting the former simply become the performative or projective effect of desires, demands, or avoidances marking the present, most prominently including the son's quest for some kind of satisfying or even redemptive meaning through memory and commemoration. Through this quest, the Holocaust, which for the father was a source of traumatic disorientation in a past that will not "pass away," seems to be transfigured into a founding trauma holding the elusive (perhaps illusory) promise of meaning and identity for the son in the present (1998 154-155).

Artie, as Spiegelman's avatar, is considerably less sophisticated than the author of *Maus*, much angrier, more impatient and less forgiving of Vladek than the text itself. His exhortations to "get back to Auschwitz" (1992 47), while reflective of the memoir's demands on testimony and history, are much more focused on meaning-making than is the structure and imagery of the text proper. *Maus* and *Fun Home*, as well as being contemplations and investigations of memory, are origin stories which concentrate on a central element of the authors' identities: survival for Spiegelman and queerness and artistry for Bechdel. The memoirs explore and interpret the origins of these cornerstones of identity. When Artie cajoles his father into telling him the story of his experience during the Second World War, he says "I want to hear it. Start with Mom... tell me how you met" (1986 12). He is asking both for the story of his own origins and the story of his parent's traumatic experience which has informed his entire life – in other words, the origins of his own suffering.

Although both authors, especially Spiegelman, emphasise the presence of the past in the present (or how the past haunts the present), they also retain the gaps and absences that

cannot be resolved by creating a narrative around personal history. Comics cannot resolve the distance between past and present. The drawn figures of Bruce Bechdel, Anja Spiegelman and the victims of the Holocaust (as well as the whole sphere of pre-WW2 European Jewish life) are dead and irretrievably lost. And yet the spectre of the past penetrates every aspect of the present. The past is both irreconcilably absent and inevitably present. Both authors reject the resolution of an over-simplified unbridgeable distance between past and present just as the conclusions of the two memoirs reject and complicate the consolations of generic endings. Bechdel and Spiegelman respect the aporia that are an essential element of memory. Comics as a medium pay particular and visual attention to absence and silence. The gutter, the space between panels, functions in a way that is not quite paralleled by silence in speech and music, and spaces and line breaks in text – after all, there are still blank spaces between words and elements of the image within comic panels. The gutter is the space where closure occurs,¹⁰ allowing readers to infer causality and often the passing of time. The gutters in these two books echo the many gaps in knowledge and presence that mark the narratives. Furthermore, both memoirs are impelled by absence on a practical level: the absence of dead parents, the absence of a past that was unspoken of and yet informed every element of their childhood. Michael G. Levine characterises time as being ‘out of joint’ in *Maus*. He suggests that this means “that the temporal and logical priority of an original over a translation, or speech over writing, of immediate over mediated experience, is being rearticulated at such moments.... I view these moments of rupture not as sporadically occurring exceptions but as the general structural rule in *Maus*” (99). This radical reordering of traditional chronology reflects the impact of trauma on narrative testimony. Caruth argues that the effects of trauma are necessarily historical and reorder the victim’s experience of time and memory.

The historical power of the trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all. And it is this inherent latency of the event that paradoxically explains the peculiar, temporal structure, the belatedness, of historical experience: since the traumatic event is not experienced as it occurs, it is fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time (8).

¹⁰ ‘Closure’ is used here in the sense of the mental process of observing parts of something but perceiving a whole. When a reader observes two panels divided by a gutter, their mind “connect[s] these moments and mentally construct[s] a continuous, unified reality” (McCloud 67).

The popularity of trauma as a subject for memoir is understandable according to these parameters. Trauma can only be recorded as retrospective history, and the moment of recollection constitutes the witnessing itself. Nancy K. Miller has suggested that “It is perhaps the way trauma binds us to a temporality that by definition we do not master that supplies the true measure of its pain” (2003 131). The victim’s inability to fully experience the traumatic moment forces them to relive that moment repeatedly throughout their life. Time, in some ways, does not pass for the traumatised. Their suffering is without a foreseeable end. Caruth suggests that trauma is characterised by its inability to be fully understood by the traumatised; that “the pathology [of trauma] consists... solely in the *structure of its experience* or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it” (4). *Fun Home*’s obsessive retelling of central, formative events in Alison’s childhood demonstrates this type of structural repetition. *Maus*’ repeated intrusions of the past into the present also reflect this systemic displacement of time. Caruth goes on to state that “the central Freudian insight into trauma, [is] that the impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time” (9). This structural dislocation obviously affects the way that histories of trauma can be written. Linear, authoritative accounts of trauma cannot accurately represent the nature of the experience and its after-effects for its subject. Despite these complications, trauma itself prompts the testimonial instinct: “The impulse to return to the past, the fascination with recovering the past in the many forms in which it persists, is a response to the same drive that motivates the traumatic neurosis” (Elmwood). One of the impacts of trauma, then, is a compulsion to turn to history, to form a narrative around the disordered and unassimilated experience that plagues the traumatized. Spiegelman and Bechdel’s memoirs, in their insistence on personal, testimonial and archival history and in their unconventional treatments of time, are traumatic documents. Both *Fun Home* and *Maus* employ complex and layered structural narrative and graphic forms in order to express such personalised trauma.

Linear narratives do not represent the nature of time as it is perceived by those who are traumatised. The effect of trauma on narrative chronology results in a move away from linearity and progress. *Fun Home*’s narrative is not structured chronologically, instead moving between associatively linked episodes. *Maus* employs two parallel linear narratives, with the exception of the ‘Auschwitz (Time Flies)’ interlude. Spiegelman claims that this is to make it

more accessible: he states that his father did not testify chronologically, and that he had to rearrange the order of events himself to make them coherent and avoid his father's "scattershot" chronology (*The Complete Maus*). However, certain images do recur, such as the lovers' reunion and the iris. The linear chronology suggests the onward march of time, which is particularly relevant to Vladek's old age, and how in terms of time we are moving away from the Shoah and yet as various graphic strategies suggest, it is still present. But the linear timelines emphasise Art's inheritance as a survivor from his father and the necessity of his assuming the role of testifier on his father's behalf, in order to chronicle and communicate his father's history.

Fun Home employs reverse narration and non-linear movement of time. The narration in *Fun Home* circles and returns to central moments of trauma: the coming out conversation with Alison's mother when her father's homosexual affairs are revealed, Bruce's death, the snake encounter and the moment when Alison receives news of her father's death. The memoir displays a compulsive urge to return to these traumatic central moments, echoing Alison's OCD. While in the grip of her disorder, Alison must perfect and repeat specific rituals in order to assuage her 'dark fear of annihilation' (139). In a similar fashion, unable to entirely integrate (and thus dismiss) the traumatic events of Alison's history, the memoir retells them. Chute describes *Fun Home*'s narrative as "recursive, not chronological" ('Gothic Revival'). As discussed in chapter one, "Old Father, Old Artificer," the shadow of Roy, Bruce's teenage lover, can be seen behind Alison in the two illustrations of her sexual epiphany in the college bookshop. Her father's sexual past (the scene takes place eleven years after Bruce's affair with Roy) collides with Alison's sexual awakening. And yet this is necessarily a retrospective drawing – Roy was not actually there at the moment of Alison's sexual epiphany. The past, embodied by Roy's silhouette, falls out of joint in order to inform Alison's present, just as Bruce's death "resonate[s] retroactively" (23).

The snake, the feature of one of the recurrent traumatic encounters, is a powerful image in the memoir. This "laden experience" represents both Alison and Bruce's sexualities (Bechdel 143).

The serpent is a vexingly ambiguous archetype. It's obviously a phallus, yet a more ancient and universal symbol of the feminine principle would be hard to come by. Perhaps this undifferentiation, this nonduality, is the point. Maybe that's what's so unsettling about snakes. They also imply cyclicity, life from death, creation from

destruction. And in a way, you could say that my father's end was my beginning. Or more precisely, that the end of his lie coincided with the beginning of my truth (116-117).

The panel accompanying the sentence beginning "They also imply..." illustrates the nine year old Alison bidding her father goodnight as he dandily sips liqueur from a tiny glass and reads *The Worm Ouroboros*, its cover helpfully illustrated by an image of the snake eating its own tail. Furthermore, the panel which includes the text boxes for the last two sentences of the above quote is an image of the side of the road where Alison's father was killed. *Fun Home's* narrative-time strategy is not as simple as the cyclic model of the ouroboros, but it leans heavily on it. Alison's artistry and mastery of her own sexuality emerges from her father's self-destruction, and the memoir's means of demonstrating time reflect this, particularly in the book's last page. The joined ouroboros is not a perfect metaphor for their split relationship. Bruce is the self-destructive aspect of the snake and Alison represents the new life rising from that. Repetition is used both thematically and formally to explore the possibility of children becoming their parents. The experience of trauma forces one to repeatedly return to specific moments in time, but repetition carries more hopeful implications in *Fun Home* as Alison is a kind of improved, fully realized and actualized replication of her father. Chute notes that "The idea of replication – of generation, of reproduction, of repetition-only-maybe-with-a-difference – haunts *Fun Home*" ('Gothic Revival'). In the first chapter of *Fun Home*, Bechdel describes her father's loss as echoing back retroactively. It is her father's neglect that creates this sense of absence throughout Alison's childhood. However, this retrospective absence also suggests a non-conventional treatment of time that Bechdel adopts in the structure of the rest of the book. The complex management of time in the narrative, and its "tricky reverse narration," allow the reconciliation of Alison with her father.

The presence of the past in the present in *Maus* is reflected in its constant graphic conflation of time periods. The movement of time between past and present in *Maus* ties into the book's discussion of children becoming their parents as they age. Artie is decidedly *not* his father: he is bohemian, artistic, and highly critical of Vladek's miserly and complaining ways – and yet he is Vladek's inheritor. Artie collects scraps of the past to save and record in the same way that Vladek conserves pieces of junk that he finds in the street that might become useful and preserves domestic detritus in his basement. Much like Alison's repetition of Bruce's queerness

and obsessive-to-the-point-of-pedantry artistry, Artie replicates the features of his father's character of which he is most suspicious. As LaCapra notes, "The question that may haunt both Artie and the reader is whether and to what extent Artie is coming to repeat or reincarnate precisely what he criticizes or even execrates in his father, notably obsessiveness, peevishness, and imperviousness to the needs of others" (1998 154). The past does not only intrude into the present to inform it with traumatic memory. Alison and Artie find themselves embodying the past as they come to inhabit their fathers' characteristics.

There are many instances of the breaking down of a binary division between past and present in *Maus*. As Vladek, Artie and Françoise drive through the woods, away from the Catskills, Vladek narrates the story of a group of young girls who were hanged in Auschwitz for "sneak[ing] over the ammunition" for the prisoners' rebellion which blew up a crematorium

(1992 79). Their bodies are drawn hanging from the trees next to the roadside as the car passes by in the 1970s, the bottoms of their skirts, their legs and feet

visible underneath Vladek's speech bubble. Vladek describes the women as "good friends of Anja, from Sosnowiec. They hanged a long, long time... *sigh*" (79); so long, the image suggests, that the effects of their murder linger still into the present. It is at moments like these that "the present seems to be only a function of, or a diaphanous screen for, the past" (LaCapra 1998 155). When Vladek describes the 'selektion' process and inspections by Mengele, over three consecutive panels, he physically re-enacts the instructions to "Turn left!" and the quarter turns that each inmate had to perform. To his right, Artie stands smoking, observing with his tape recorder, documenting Vladek's testimony (1992 58). In the fourth panel, the present day

is replaced with an image of the emaciated naked prisoner Vladek, turning, and Mengele with his notepad and pen substitutes Artie, his

recorder and cigarette. This substitution, with its identical positioning and similar means of recording, implicates Art as an abusive documentarian, like Mengele, as noted in chapter two, and furthermore blurs easy distinctions between the actions of the past and their re-enactment in the present. McGlothlin argues that this sequence

establish[s] a visual analogue between the representation of an original scene of victimization and trauma and the retelling of the event, insisting that the two are not distinct, mutually exclusive processes.... the present, the site of Vladek's verbal narration, is superimposed upon the representation of the past, as embodied in the comic image, and the past story that is narrated bears the visual traces of the act of storytelling. The present, both visually and metaphorically, thus "turns" into the past.

Levine reads *Maus* as "an act of *belated witnessing*" on both Art and Vladek's part (67). He argues that "it is this implication of the second-generation survivor in the traumas of the first that not only tangles the lines of descent but makes Art a witness to the *delayed impact* of the Holocaust" (68).

There are more simple and subtle examples of the intrusion of one time period into another. As Artie lies on the floor at Vladek's feet in the present, his legs overlap an image of Vladek as a soldier during the war (1986 45). A similar moment is the placement of the iris that introduces the youthful Vladek over the wheel of the exercycle, as he begins his testimony. There are various instances of these kinds of moments that centre around ash, clearly a potent symbol in a Holocaust narrative. In one panel, while Vladek describes the crematoria chimneys in Auschwitz, Artie smokes. In the panel below, the crematorium chimney is positioned directly

below Artie's cigarette smoke, an instance of conflating Artie's extraction of testimony from Vladek with the industrialized genocide of the Holocaust (1992 69), along with the two time periods. At another point, Vladek narrates his obscene, Herculean task as a prisoner of war of clearing out an enormous stable in an hour. Suddenly, the narrative switches back to an interruption in the testimony: Artie has spilt ash on the carpet and Vladek shouts "You're dropping on the carpet *cigarette* ashes. You want it should be like a stable *here?*" (1986 52)

Discussing this incident, Levine argues that

While such outbursts are clearly meant to destabilize the relationship between past and present, between the level of the telling and that of the tale, at other times the moment back and forth is more regulated and is made to accelerate in such a way that the focus gradually shifts from whatever is going on in either the past or the present to the pulsating, back-and-forth movement itself (93).

While recounting an especially traumatic occurrence, the burning of men alive in mass graves, Vladek is interrupted by his accidental breaking of a favourite plate. The mass graves are described with a shockingly banal contemporary analogue, “big, so like the swimming pool of the Pines Hotel there” (1992 72). What is narrated next is frame-shattering: “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 what 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” (1992 72). Rifkind suggests that “The broken plate is a symptom in the present of the pain of retrieving the past and, as such, it signifies the disruptions of psychic and familial unity that can result from collaborative auto-biography” (405). In the panel following the illustration of the mice-men being burnt to death, Vladek cries “Ach! It’s 2.30. Look how the time is flying. And it’s still so much to do today...” (73) Even as past horrors intrude into the present, the present still places demands on the characters. They can have no impact on the past.

One of the most striking examples of the conflation of past and present is the first page of the ‘Auschwitz (Time Flies)’ chapter. The flies that swarm around the image of Jews burning to death in the fire pits in Auschwitz on the chapter title page, and that hover around Art and his pile of the dead, are metaphors for both the continuing presence of the past (they surround Art) and Art’s own parasitical relationship with the Holocaust as an artist. The title, ‘Auschwitz (Time Flies),’ superimposed on the image of Jews dying in agonising pain in burning mass graves, is searingly ironic. ‘Time Flies’ most obviously refers to the clichéd phrase ‘time flies when you are having fun’. The mere allusion to fun juxtaposed with this image of shocking agony only further emphasises its horror. Bechdel employs a similar archly ironic use of ‘fun’ in her title: ‘fun home’ refers to the Bechdel’s sardonic nickname for the family funeral directing business. ‘Time Flies’ also refers to time’s inevitable march away from these traumatic events,

this centre of horror. The image of death is arresting; time seems irrelevant to such suffering. And yet, as evidenced by Art's list of dates, time passes. Despite the traumatised's 'out of joint' experience of time, despite the past's presence in and influence on the present, what has been lost in time cannot be reclaimed. Vladek's death is the first event that is narrated in this chapter, and this revelation intensifies the drive to record the oral history of survivors before the tide of time claims them all. Anja and Vladek's

experiences can't be assimilated into a well-ordered notion of history and family legacy; as happens frequently in *Maus*, they jut outside the established frame into the surrounding narrative, refusing to stay integrated into a fully comprehended and comprehensible past. Although the events of Art's life give credence to the illusion that he has overcome his parents' trauma and that his life has developed beyond their memory, the fractured chronology he experiences belies the notion of development and moving on. Art becomes a prisoner in this realm of static and dislocated temporality. Like the bodies on which Art's table is propped, the past is left unburied and continues to haunt the present by its very presence (McGlothlin).

In 'Time Flies', all the characters are depicted without animal-heads, instead wearing animal masks over human heads. Spiegelman refers to this time period as a 'superpresent' (*The Complete Maus*). McGlothlin, by contrast, identifies this chapter as taking place in "this disconnected, disjointed time that is neither part of the developing present nor a part of the calcified past" (McGlothlin). Spiegelman and McGlothlin's characterisations are not necessarily at odds. While 'Time Flies' is situated in time (time passes in a linear and coherent fashion; the date of the page's composition is given as "the very end of February 1987": it is located several years after the 'present' narrative), it also narrates events that cannot literally have happened (1992 41). The surreality of the episode – the corpses, the masks, the invasion of journalists, Art's Alice-like shrinking and growing – is unlike the almost unpunctured realism (excepting, obviously, the animal heads and tails, and moments such as the hanging bodies in the woods in the Catskills) and often domestic banality of the 1970s narrative and the 1940s narrative.

Art's opening monologue in 'Time Flies' juxtaposes different events from his father's war experience and his own modern-day life. The different events detailed are located in specific time periods, and are juxtaposed with thematically similar or vividly different events. McGlothlin notes that "the events, though seemingly arbitrarily arranged, are carefully juxtaposed to evoke the enormous impact of the past on the present and the radical difference

between Vladek's Holocaust past and Art's present." Graphically, Art in his studio is backlit by shifting rays of light that resemble a partially obscured swastika, echoing the iris motif. His window looks out onto a camp watchtower and wire fence. Most significantly, his artist's desk sits upon a pile of dead mouse-headed bodies. The conflation of the concentration camp past and the bohemian, metropolitan present of Art's 1980s New York existence that is shown in the 'Time Flies' chapter is repeated in the author image in the author bio on the back 'dust jacket' flap of each book. The mouse-masked Spiegelman sits, head in hands, at his desk, smoking. His window looks out onto a smoking camp chimney, a barbed wire fence and an unmasked SS cat guard toting a rifle. The Shoah is ever-present, lurking just over Art's shoulder.

Art's cigarettes are labelled 'Cremo Lights' and have an image of the incinerator's chimneys.

This encourages the reading of the ongoing visual motif of Art's smoking throughout the book as more than just a personality quirk and character recognition cue, but as a sign of Artie's addiction to and obsession with guilt around his own personal survival as a child of survivors, and of the haunting of the Holocaust in general. Levine reads Artie's cigarettes as a symbol for the process of the creation of *Maus* (90). The cigarettes allow Artie to function daily due to his addiction but they are also cancerously

toxic. Like the production of the text of *Maus*, Art's 'Cremo Lights' are simultaneously life giving and destructive. There are symbols of burning throughout *Maus*: Vladek's burning of Anja's diaries, the burning mass graves in Auschwitz as the centre of horror, the crematoria in the gas chambers in Auschwitz, and Artie's cigarettes. Levine comments that in the author illustration, "with each pull on his cigarette Art in effect draws in a breath of Auschwitz" (91). The author portrait repeats 'Auschwitz (Time Flies)'s representation of Art forlornly sitting at his desk, surrounded by Holocaust signifiers. This repetition, the extra-diegetic time period of the

chapter with its radical breaking of the narrative frame and the complication of the animal head metaphor with the use of masks are the most important graphic elements in this page. These features combine to make the image of Art at his desk, atop the pile of dead victims a key visual of the text, an essential metaphor for the continuing and inescapable presence of the past and the artist's own culpability.

This conflation of the Holocaust past and the 1980s present is essential for the final sentence on the first page of 'Time Flies' to work. From outside the frame, a speech bubble says "Alright Mr. Spiegelman... We're ready to shoot!..." (1992 41). The ubiquity and popularity of film production in our culture makes the filmic meaning of this phrase evident. However, the graphic concentration camp imagery, and Art's verbal references to the Holocaust, shadow this phrase with a Holocaust context: of gun, not camera shooting. Art here is both a perpetrator and a victim of the Holocaust. It is critical that Art is depicted on top of the pile of corpses, and not underneath it. He is not merely buried by the weight of his family and people's history; as an artist (depicted at his desk), he is responsible for and profits from the victims' deaths and suffering.

Maus acknowledges that in certain ways time has not passed. The image of Vladek narrating his testimony as he pedals on his exercycle is a powerful metaphor for this. Vladek pedals and pedals in order to stay alive, and yet his bicycle remains stationary. *Maus* has two basically linear parallel narratives, although time does not pass at the same rate in each. As well as these two, there is the meta-meta-narrative chapter, 'Auschwitz (Time Flies)', which is set in a separate time scheme again. *Fun Home* on the other hand plays with the traditional linear time sequence by rejecting it and shifting around in time, moving between thematic and motif connections. These jumps in time are smoothed over by associations with words and particularly images. This narrative movement encourages the reading of the text as memory, enforcing the nature of the text as a subjective remembered narrative. It both makes its claims for authority with documentary evidence (as discussed in chapter one) and gives us a self-questioning highly individuated voice. Bechdel tells the basic story components in the first chapter (the aesthete father of a butch (not at this point explicitly lesbian) daughter has sex with young men, kills himself in middle age) and so can return again and again (like trauma!) to the same important and traumatic moments in her childhood. Trauma, thus, enforces repetition and the continuing presence of the past.

Narrative comics use the physical space of the page to depict time. They utilize absence in the grammatical form of gutters to, among other things, represent the passing of time.¹¹ Usually, between one panel and the next, the reader can assume that time has passed and that panel A is chronologically precedent to panel B. Of course, Spiegelman and Bechdel both break this 'rule' regularly, as they move between varying time periods. As Scott McCloud argues in *Understanding Comics*, gutters use closure in many complex ways: moment-to-moment, action-to-action, subject-to-subject, scene-to-scene, aspect-to-aspect and non-sequitur (74). The first four types of transition between panels usually suggest a linear passing of time, while aspect-to-aspect transitions are usually atmospheric and non-sequitur transitions refuse logical connection (although "alchemy at work in the space between panels which can help us find *meaning or resonance* in even the most *jarring* of combinations" (73)). Spiegelman, himself an important theorist on grammar in comics as well as an artist and historian, states that "comics, in their essence, are about time made manifest spatially, in that you've got all these different chunks of time – each box being a different moment of time – and you see them all at once. As a result you're always, in comics, being aware of different times inhabiting the same space. That's a theme of *Maus*" (Silverblatt 133). Thomas A. Bredehoft deftly articulates the radical possibilities for depicting the passage of time that comics allow:

The nature of time-sequencing itself, however, whether in chronology or narrative line, is that time is uni-directional and irreversible: time passes, or we pass through time. The underlying metaphor, of course, is that time functions like one dimension of space: the narrative line is linear, precisely because language itself (or the procession of images that we see in film) is sequenced unidirectionally in time. In contrast to film or language-based narration, however, the medium of comics offers the possibility of a narrative mode that disrupts time-sequencing itself, and it appears to be the case that it is the specifically two-dimensional architecture of the comics pages that allows comics narration to break the linearity of a time-sequenced narrative line.

¹¹ McCloud argues that gutters' blankness prompts closure and connection between panels in the reader's mind, stating "If visual iconography is the vocabulary of comics, closure is its grammar" (67).

In English prose writing and film, the eye must go from left to right or follow the images on screen as they appear. The order in which one perceives information is (fairly) strictly controlled. One usually reads the comics page as one reads prose writing (left to right, top to bottom). Neither Bechdel nor Spiegelman challenge this model in the radical way that an artist like Chris Ware sometimes does, but their use of images allows for abrupt and clear transitions across time periods. Spiegelman plays with the linear mode of reading panels when he uses this left-to-right, top-to-bottom style yet at the same time has a larger image stretching across

a page and several panels. The beginning and the near-end of Vladek's testimony are bookended by this kind of image. As Vladek begins his narrative, his body on his exercise stretches across three panels and two thirds of the page. Towards the end of *Maus II*, as Vladek recounts the deaths of all but one of his brothers and sisters, his body stretches similarly across four panels and two-thirds of the page. His

slumped posture and bowed head contrast starkly with the former image of direction and action. Bechdel rarely moves away from a tightly controlled sequencing of panels and allows the reader's eye to shift, the photograph of Roy with its disordered captions being perhaps the only instance. On the final page, Bechdel prevents the reader's eye from moving back up to the panel illustrating the truck after they have read the final caption by placing Alison's black swimming costume, the only solid block of darkness in the whole page, centrally. The angle of Alison's body, and especially of her limbs, then draw the reader's eye to the largely whited out, detailed drawing of Bruce's face and torso. This is the image that the reader's eye lingers on at the end of the book, ultimately confirming the memoir as a tribute to Bechdel's father.

When describing the Fortunoff Video Archives for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University, Horowitz notes the way that time functions in survivors' narratives:

two chronologies emerge in the Yale videotapes. One moves linearly through time, reflecting the survivor's active memory and asserting continuity with the pre-Holocaust past and the normalized present. The other loops endlessly into the past. "[S]eized by memory," the witness reexperiences grief as raw, immediate and ongoing, "normal" life notwithstanding. Out of these chronologies come two conflicting rhetorics – of love and hope, and of anguish and despair (21).

Maus manages to convey these two kinds of chronology simultaneously. There is the chronological, linear and Odyssean structure of Vladek and Anja's descent into the underworld of Auschwitz and Dachau and their return and eventual reunion, as well as the ongoing and ceaseless suffering that their experience has caused. The Holocaust does not end for them with their reunion: it continues in Vladek's nightmares and Anja's suicide. However, the book works hard to show that their situations and characters are complex enough that the Holocaust is not the only reason for their problems (Anja already suffered from depression; Vladek's racism towards the black hitchhiker is unaffected by his own experience as a victim of racism; Mala does not share the same problems as Vladek). In 'Prisoner on the Hell Planet,' Artie suggests both "menopausal depression" and "Hitler did it!" as explanations for Anja's suicide (1986 103). These phrases are conveyed as swerving bold exclamations crammed in one panel with two other emotionally expressive words, "Mommy!" and "Bitch". Neither reason is adequate. Anja's death and absence can never be fully accounted for. This is particularly noticeable in Art's opening statement that "In 1968, when I was 20, my mother killed herself... she left no note!" (1986 100), repeated in 'Time Flies,' "In May 1968 my mother killed herself. (She left no note.)" (1992 41). The final page of *Maus*, as well as the many other examples of graphically conflated time periods in the book, suggests a timeline which, in the way that the Fortunoff Video testimonies do, "loops endlessly into the past."

Both *Fun Home* and *Maus* refuse total closure, as discussed in chapter two, although *Fun Home* is less insistent in its rejection. However, its last page with its reverse time-lining and its insistence on "tricky reverse narration" ultimately refuses the 'past' nature of history. Both books insist on the continuation of history into the present, the inextricable presence of the past in the present. *Fun Home* does this in a more positive sense: if narration can be reversed,

if the past is not exclusively in the past, then history can be rewritten and the meaning of events, lives and people can be constantly re-envisioned and reworked.

The concepts of time and chronology are predicated on a kind of absence. The present is defined by the absence of the past and the absence of the future. The passing of time evokes a temporal absence and allows for the creation of narrative to attempt to compensate for the absence of the past. Memoir functions as a supplement to the past. Andreas Huyssen explores this in his description of all memory: “today we rather think of memory as a mode of representation and as belonging ever more to the present. After all, the act of remembering is always in and of the present, while its referent is of the past and thus absent. Inevitably, every act of memory carries with it a dimension of betrayal, forgetting, and absence” (3-4). Comics, with their conventional use of panels divided by gutters, literalize the question of presence and absence. Chute thus reads comics as a particularly relevant medium for memoir, which goes some way to explaining the great popularity of autobiographical comics in recent years:

Cartoonist Chris Ware suggests that comics itself is “a possible metaphor for memory and recollection” (xxii). Images appear in fragments, just as they do in actual recollection; this fragmentation, in particular, is a prominent feature of traumatic memory. The art of crafting words and pictures together into a narrative punctuated by pause or absence, as in comics, also mimics the procedure of memory (2010 4).

As well as time, the entire biographical (and historical) project is predicated upon absence: the absence of the past from the present. Biography and history attempt to compensate for this absence by creating narratives to stand in for the past, but they also rely entirely on it. Both books hinge on absences. These absences are both epistemological and literal. The oft-incurred loss of Anja’s diaries is a synecdoche for her own personal absence, and also for the voices and testimonies of the six million Jewish victims of the Holocaust. Her burnt diaries also stand for the possibility of closure, resolution and catharsis. Anja’s voice and testimony can never be heard, just as the full narrative of both of Artie’s parents’ story cannot be told, only Vladek’s remembered and subjective side. James E. Young discusses this point:

Spiegelman does not attempt to retell Anja’s story at all, but leaves it known only by its absence; he is an accomplice to the usurpation of his dead mother’s voice. It is a blank page, to be presented as blank.... As a void at the heart of *Maus*, the mother’s lost

story may be *Maus*'s negative center of gravity, the invisible planet around which both the father's telling and Spiegelman's recovery of it revolve (686).

Likewise, the literal absence in *Fun Home* is Bechdel's father. His absence is largely prospective, as Bechdel notes her father's death first on page 23: "It's true that he didn't kill himself until I was nearly twenty," so that the reader's experience of Bechdel's account of her childhood over the next 209 pages is informed by this knowledge. On the second page, Bechdel alludes to his death: "In our particular re-enactment of this mythic relationship, it was not me but my father who was to plummet from the sky" (4). In fact, Bechdel addresses this future absence when she first relates his death.

His absence resonated retroactively, echoing back through all the time I knew him. Maybe it was the converse of the way amputees feel pain in a missing limb. He really was there all those years, a flesh-and-blood presence steaming off the wallpaper, digging up the dogwoods, polishing the finials... smelling of sawdust and sweat and designer cologne. But I ached as if he were already gone (23).

Absence in Bechdel's narrative is at least threefold. There is first the lack of comprehensive knowledge about her father's sexual history and his silence about it. Secondly, her father is emotionally absent and abusive, and eventually literally and definitively absent after his death. Repeated images of barely provoked and aggressive violence occur early in the memoir: when comparing her family to the film *It's a Wonderful Life*, she makes the distinction that "in the movie when Jimmy Stewart comes home one night and starts yelling at everyone... it's out of the ordinary" (11). Domineering images of Bruce being violent or menacing occur on pages 11, 12 and 21. He is consistently drawn as unsmiling and not looking at his children. On the first page Bechdel refers to her "rare physical contact" with her father (3). A singular attempt at physical contact results in a comically inept instance of the child Alison kissing her father's hand: "all I managed was to grab his hand and buss the knuckles lightly... as if he were a bishop or an elegant lady, before rushing from the room in embarrassment" (19). Thirdly, and most importantly to the text, there is the lack of knowledge about whether or not Bruce's death was intentional. Bechdel allows the total absence of concrete evidence that would point to suicide, admitting that

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'd been reading and leaving around the house in what might be construed as a deliberate manner.... I don't believe it was an accident (27-28).

Bechdel suggests several reasons why the ambiguity surrounding her father's death is so important to her. The lack of concrete evidence or knowledge about whether his death was intentional or accidental means that she can shape it to her own narrative preferences and needs. After wondering if her father timed his death to match up with the lifespan of Fitzgerald, Alison rejects this idea as "that would only confirm that his death was not my fault. That, in fact, it had nothing to do with me at all. And I'm reluctant to let go of that last, tenuous bond" (86). Interpreting Bruce's suicide is a way to claim the importance of herself to her father: to establish a bond that was largely absent when he was alive. Moreover, while she is discussing her father's death with her mother just after it occurred, her mother says "I think it was something he always meant to do." Bechdel comments that "It's possible that we chose to believe this because it was less painful. If he'd intended to die, there was a certain consolation in the fact that he succeeded with such aplomb" (29). Ascribing intention and agency to her father's death accords him the glamour and artistry that he so desired during life. Although he failed to become a professional artist during his lifetime, reading his death as a success revisions it as a creative act rather than a random and chaotic act of destruction.

Her father's absence allows Bechdel to write his narrative as she sees fit, rather than in his own words. It is in this way that the memoir is both a betrayal and a homage. The book pays tribute to Alison's inheritance of sexuality, artistry and literary concerns from her father and stakes a claim for his spiritual as well as biological paternity of her. Nonetheless, Bechdel still speaks for Bruce and shapes a stronger bond in the narrative structure than is supported by the related experiences of their relationship throughout the text. Bechdel suggests as much at the end of the book:

"Erotic truth" is a rather sweeping concept. I shouldn't pretend to know what my father's was. 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 (230).

This sense of speaking for another and moulding them to one's preferred view occurs in *Maus*. Anja's absence and the destruction of her diaries mean that Artie and Vladek are free to represent her in their own view. In 'Prisoner on the Hell Planet,' in the three panels in which we see Anja alive, she is depressed, haunted, with ringed eyes and her left hand clutching at her dressing gown. Her motherhood is emphasized by her exaggerated breasts and hips, appropriately as Spiegelman narrates "I turned away, resentful of the way she tightened the umbilical cord" (103). Anja is giant and oppressive. She fills the door frame, huge hand gripping the doorknob, looming over the tiny Artie and desperately seeking his love: "...Artie ...you ...still ...love ...me ...don't you?" (103). She is otherwise represented (in this comic) in two panels as a naked corpse in a bathtub that is black with bloodied water. The reader cannot see her face in these two panels: the physicality of her suicide has reduced her to a body. This corporeal approach to her death is further reflected in the image, entitled "Bitch," of her tattooed forearms as she slits her wrists. The only other drawn image we see of her is the one entitled "Mommy!" as she

reads in bed to a tiny, prison uniform-clad Artie. The photograph that opens the comic shows Anja looking distracted and distant from the delightedly grinning Artie. The scale that the younger Spiegelman attributes to Anja imagines her self-destruction as a black hole, a vortex that drags in Vladek (at the funeral, he loses his composure, climbing on her coffin and repeatedly screaming "ANNA! ANNA!") and Artie himself (he accuses his mother of having murdered him).

By contrast, the Anja of Vladek's narrative is a tiny, fragile woman. Vladek describes her as "so skinny and nervous" (19). She is obedient to Vladek's demands: after he tells her to break with a Communist friend, he says "she was a good girl, and of course she stopped all such things"

(29). Vladek reports that her father describes her as “always hysterical or depressed... a *breakdown!*” (31). Rather than the woman of ‘Prisoner,’ who is hugely, passively destructive in her grief and depression, Vladek’s Anja is weak and pliable. Her depression cedes easily to his encouragements: “I understood much of such sicknesses, so I helped always to calm her down” (34); “I told her many jokes and stories to keep her busy... and she was so laughing and so happy, so happy, that she approached me each time and kissed me, so happy she was” (35). These vividly contrasting versions of Anja, while not necessarily impossible to reconcile, reveal the effects of representation by others. Anja cannot represent herself. Although self-representation would not necessarily be any more ‘truthful’ than her husband and son’s perspectives, a depiction of her inner life over which she would have mastery and control cannot be achieved.

The real mystery of Bruce’s death is overshadowed by the anti-mystery of his sexuality. The question of his suicide is pushed aside in the narrative structure to focus on the more concrete fact of his absence and the retroactive echoing of this throughout his life: his neglect, his emotional absence and rages. The naked cadaver that Bruce shows Alison when she is ten (her age suggested by her mullet, a hairstyle that she sports in other episodes where she is identified as ten) functions as a powerful symbolic analogue for her father. The man is middle-

aged, like Bruce: “bearded and fleshy, jarringly unlike Dad’s usual traffic of desiccated old people” (44). He is sexual, startlingly physical and present,

with the ‘shocking’ “strange pile of his genitals” (the penis is prominently shaded in both images of the corpse, and he has a large quantity of body hair and a beard) (44). Yet the man is also absent: not only dead, obviously, but his presence is most marked by the massive absence in his body: “What really got my attention was his chest, split open to a dark red cave” (44). The “gaping cadaver” reads as a metaphor for her father, physically present and yet essentially absent (45). The shockingly private and frightening cavity of the man’s torso symbolizes Bruce’s hidden and transgressive sexuality. The man’s hollowed-out chest is, like the snake later

encountered on a camping trip, obviously male, but also feminine: a “dark red cave”. It suggests the doubling of Alison and Bruce’s sexualities, hidden from the public until her own adulthood.¹² As Bechdel comments on the photograph of Roy, “In an act of prestidigitation typical of the way my father juggled his public appearance and private reality, the evidence is simultaneously hidden and revealed” (100-101). Alison and Bruce’s brief exchange over the dead man is one of several moments in the text where Alison and Bruce come together in a moment of potential communication, and fail to express more than the quotidian: “There was some practical exchange with my father during which I studiously betrayed no emotion. It felt like a test” (44). The book itself constitutes a struggle against the absence of a perfectly articulated response to trauma and dysfunctional relationships. It is an attempt to make something meaningful out of an absence, to form a coherent and meaningful narrative out of something so troubled and sad that it threatens to be meaningless.

The description of this event is followed by a brief exploration of Alison’s inability to feel emotion in the face of personal tragedy.

For years after my father’s death, when the subject of parents came up in conversation I would relate the information in a flat, matter-of-fact tone... “My dad’s dead. He jumped in front of a truck.” ...eager to detect in my listener the flinch of grief that eluded me. The emotion I had suppressed for the gaping cadaver seemed to stay suppressed.... Even when it was Dad himself on the prep table (45).

She has inherited her father’s emotional absence. The colour palette of the memoir reflects this restraint: the only colours used are black, varying strengths of a grey-green wash, and the white of the page. The tiny colour spectrum also lends the book a sense of melancholy that a more varied colour palette (like Lynda Barry’s vibrant and multihued comics) would not suggest. It is interesting that these two graphic narratives which are so haunted by absences are so graphically dense. Spiegelman’s panels are all in black and white. They are intensely detailed and employ heavy cross-hatching and shading. Their crowded, scrappy aesthetic was

¹² It is notable that Alison’s coming-out is immediately matched with the revelation of her father’s affairs with men. Both Alison and Bruce both simultaneously conceal and act upon their sexualities during Alison’s childhood. While Alison dresses up as a man with her female friend and privately worships cultural symbols of masculinity, Bruce turns his house into a spectacle of camp aesthetics and seduces local teenagers.

partly achieved by the choice to maintain a 1:1 ratio between production and publication (most comics originals are much larger than the printed page, so that a reduced version will minimise or hide mistakes). The two books are also very dialogue-heavy. Spiegelman has described a legacy from his father's experience in the Holocaust as translating into a legacy of comics-creating: "It was very important at a young age to see how much you could fit into the small volume of a suitcase. I always thought of it as a useful kind of early training" (Kannenberg Jr 245). Bechdel's use of a light grey-green wash allows her to achieve shading without the density of *Maus'* two-tone panels, and is by contrast much less visually claustrophobic. However, the placement of the narratorial text in the gutters crowds the page and lends it a suffocating air of narrative control. This text placement reveals a flaw in Chute's otherwise intriguing and insightful argument about absence and presence in *Fun Home*:

As the massive profusion of ornamental objects in his Victorian home reveals, Bruce Bechdel is obsessed with presence.... Bruce Bechdel needs to reaffirm the presence of things – protuberant, decorative things – in order to cover over the gaps, to concoct a family space whose proliferative material aspect stands in and covers for its dearth of transparency and emotional connection. Alison Bechdel, on the other hand, is preoccupied with absence and loss, investigating her father's death, but she makes loss and absence *present* throughout the book. Father and daughter recuperate loss differently: he covers absence with presence; she invokes presence, but this is counterbalanced by the white, emptied-out gutter spaces of comics.... the book itself... both captures presence, and also activates blank spaces as part of its architecture. The contrast, or the paradox, of presence and absence limns the book; it is the form, and theme, that most fundamentally constitutes *Fun Home* (2010 180).

Nonetheless, despite the density of the horizontal gutters, the vertical gutters are still empty, and the three-toned palette lends the page a minimalism that is in contrast to the profusion of detail in Bruce's interior decoration. Bechdel's hyper-literate narration both elegantly and emphatically steers the reader through the memoir and acknowledges its own aporia. *Fun Home* "does not seek to preserve the past as it was, as its archival obsession might suggest, but rather to circulate ideas about the past with gaps fully intact" (Chute 2010 180). Bechdel, while making her own interpretation of her father's death clear, does not insist on this reading. While Bruce Bechdel attempted to restore his family home into a perfect, hermetically sealed simulacrum of nineteenth-century domestic glamour, Alison Bechdel creates a postmodern

text that slips easily between a multiplicity of time periods, opening up the absences, failures and humiliations of her story. Chute argues that

Bruce Bechdel wants the past to be whole; Alison Bechdel makes it free-floating. We see this in the way she animates the past in a book that is... a counterarchitecture to the stifling, shame-filled house in which she grew up: she animates and releases its histories, circulating them and giving them life even when they devolve on death (2010 216).

Absence and history are inextricably linked. Both Spiegelman and Bechdel structure their narratives in order to show the effect of trauma on the individual's perception and experience of time. They partially avoid a betrayal of the past by retaining the aporia that are an essential part of the fabric of these memoirs, but also acknowledge the inevitable violence that writing any necessarily limited and subjective history entails.

Conclusion

Spiegelman's *Maus* and Bechdel's *Fun Home* trace the authors' complex genealogies of suffering, and in the latter case, of desire. Both texts are origin stories. Spiegelman witnesses his father's testimony in order to better understand his relationship with his father, and moreover to discover the origins of his own post-memory trauma. He specifically requests that his father testify to the beginning of his relationship with Artie's mother, and to his experiences in the camp. He repeatedly dismisses Vladek's attempts to talk about his current life, and to gripe about his dysfunctional marriage with Mala. Artie is only interested in his own origins, and the source of the catastrophic experience that has informed his entire life.

Bechdel narrates the story of her relationship with her father in order to understand her queer origins and the beginnings of her career as a cartoonist. Bechdel combines her father's visual "passion" for historical restoration of homes and his "ardent" love of gardening with his obsessive reading of modernist literature in her comics, co-mingling detailed images with sophisticated prose. Likewise, it is her aversion to her father's domineering and ubiquitous effeminacy that leads her to become a "connoisseur of masculinity at an early age" (95). This love of "plain, two-fisted sinew" (95), matched with her father's attempt to humiliate her and quash her identification with the gay woman she sees, impels Alison to privately draw cartoons of basketball players and other bastions of "flat chest[ed] and slim hip[ped]" (170) masculinity. She masturbates as she draws these "surrogates" of herself, establishing a crucial link between queerness, eroticism and the creation of comics. For Bechdel, drawing comics is an important statement of her queer identity, whether it is in these early drawings, the twenty-five year run of her lesbian sit-com soap-opera comic, *Dykes to Watch Out For*, or the künstlerroman and cartooning manifesto that is *Fun Home*.

Maus uses a loose Orphean structure: Artie and Vladek enter into the infernal underworld of Vladek's remembered Holocaust experience in order to attempt to recover Anja, their lost mother and wife. However, she cannot be returned from death. Vladek's sentimental recollection of his reunion with Anja at the end of the war functions as an analogue to Orpheus' look back at Eurydice that causes him to lose her again. Vladek's claim that the

couple “lived happy, happy ever after” (1992 135) only bitterly and ironically emphasizes how unhappily their lives turned out, and the endless grief caused by the loss of their son and Anja’s suicide.

The registration of trauma in *Fun Home* and *Maus* is achieved through a variety of methods. Spiegelman and Bechdel include archival photographs and textual documents to assert the facticity of their historical records, and to represent the “unassimilable loss” (Hirsch 27) that is evoked by the presence of objects that were either constructed or handled by the lost family member, or the image of their absent body. Spiegelman’s reconstructed maps, timelines and diagrams reflect the anti-historical utter destruction of European Jews and their cultural and material world. Nazi policy did not want records of the mass murder of Jews; the genocide was intended to be total, and for all remnants and markers of Jewish culture in Europe to be eliminated. A testimonial text like *Maus* works against this destructive mission, creating a record of pre-war Jewish life, bearing witness to Spiegelman’s murdered relatives and the sufferings of his parents and their fellow inmates. The reproduced photographs of Spiegelman’s family act as *puncta*, rupturing the stylized narrative to echo the traumatic memories that they evoke.

Bechdel’s text also works against the historical silencing of gay culture and lives. She queers her family history, reading her family texts, from letters to photographs to household books to their physical home itself against the grain. She interprets her family archive in order to remove its veneer of tasteful and impeccable provincial Catholic intellectual life, and expose the violence and secrecy within their home. Finally, she turns this queered history into a narrative of positive inheritance, rather than a history of neglect and discord. More than simply her father’s betrayal of her mother and his malignant secret life outside his family, his archival remains come to represent his subversive connection with Alison, and their artistic and spiritual bond.

Bechdel notes that her father’s favourite flower was the lilac. Not only is the lilac a symbol of lust and fertility, but it was also associated with mourning during the nineteenth century. Sex and death are the two main facets of Bruce’s life in *Fun Home*. The narration notes that the lilac is “a tragic botanical specimen, invariably beginning to fade even before reaching its peak,” much like Bruce’s abridged life and abortive ambitions (92). The closest symbolic analogue for Alison is the vast range of texts with which she engages. Her hands are repeatedly

represented holding photographs and pointing out words in books. Selected quotations from various novels are highlighted, as if by her hand, and she is repeatedly seen reading and writing at length. Several of the most important and traumatic moments in the memoir occur through Alison's engagements with texts: she is reading a copy of *Word Is Out* in a book store when she realizes that she is a lesbian; she is surrounded by books on queerness during the phone call when her mother reveals her father's affairs; she is confronted with her father's sexuality through a photograph; she bonds with Bruce over queer texts like Millett's *Flying* and Colette's *Earthly Paradise*; writing a diary helps to "cure" her OCD. Each chapter is structured around a novel. Both Bruce and Alison are associated with writing and reading, but it is Alison who moves past Bruce's thwarted ambitions and becomes a writer and artist herself. The questions that come at the end of the memoir, "What if Icarus hadn't hurtled into the sea? What if he'd inherited his father's inventive bent? What might he have wrought?" are performatively answered by *Fun Home*'s existence (231).

Bechdel and Spiegelman are greatly concerned with the ethical implications of the act of writing personal history. Both texts acknowledge the limitations of subjective referential narratives, and the violence that writing about the life of another person entails. They demonstrate LaCapra's 'ethic of response.' They respect and retain the absences and betrayals that any memoir involves, but they do not yield to rhetorical mystification and silence. Despite the necessary lack of completion or closure that such histories entail, the presence of these texts suggests the possibility of meaning and communication.

Spiegelman delivers the traditional, sentimental ending of his parents' reunion in order to undermine the narrative tropes and closure that such a resolution would attempt to impose on the ongoing trauma of the Holocaust. The final panels, of Artie impotently standing by Vladek's bedside as he calls him by his dead brother's name and forces an ending to the testimony, suggest the endless suffering that is caused by this kind of trauma, and how little one can do to amend or improve it. Bechdel's final page reminds the reader of her father's tragic end, with its top panel of the truck mimicking what Bruce Bechdel would have seen immediately before his death, but ultimately moves towards an accepting and nurturing image of the relationship between Alison and Bruce.

Laub and Caruth's theory suggests that trauma is not experienced at the moment of the event, so the mind repeatedly returns to the shocking event in order to attempt to assimilate it. This

recursive and cyclic chronology is apparent in *Fun Home's* time strategy. *Maus*, on the other hand, graphically comingles Vladek's Holocaust past and he and Artie's domestic 1970s present in order to reflect the way in which the past haunts and informs the present, and the way in which the present situation at the moment of narration of testimony suffuses and influences the construction of memory. The absence of the past and of Anja and Bruce inform both texts, and constitute the central traumatic lacks. The graphic form of comics, with gutters and pared back colour schemes, reflects these essential absences.

It is potentially problematic to compare the trauma of losing an unlikeable father to that of being a child of survivors and a mother who killed herself. But dismissing one kind of suffering because it is on a smaller and more personal scale than another oversimplifies the matter, and creating a competition out of pain is of little use to anyone. It is Bechdel and Spiegelman's responses to their trauma that is significant, the similar and divergent ways in which they interrogate their relationships with their fathers and introspectively examine the problems of writing personal history about suffering. They employ similar techniques to register trauma and loss. Both authors juxtapose catastrophic shock with the banality of quotidian domestic life, and the ways in which each sphere interpenetrates the other. Bechdel is an artistic inheritor of Spiegelman, but her work is far from pastiche; she writes within a tradition that has its roots in Rousseau and Justin Green, and that Spiegelman adapted and refined for the comics medium. Personal witnessing and confession come together in these comics to register historic suffering and memory in an assertion of necessary presence against the mystification of the ineffable.

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