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Image as Paratext in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*

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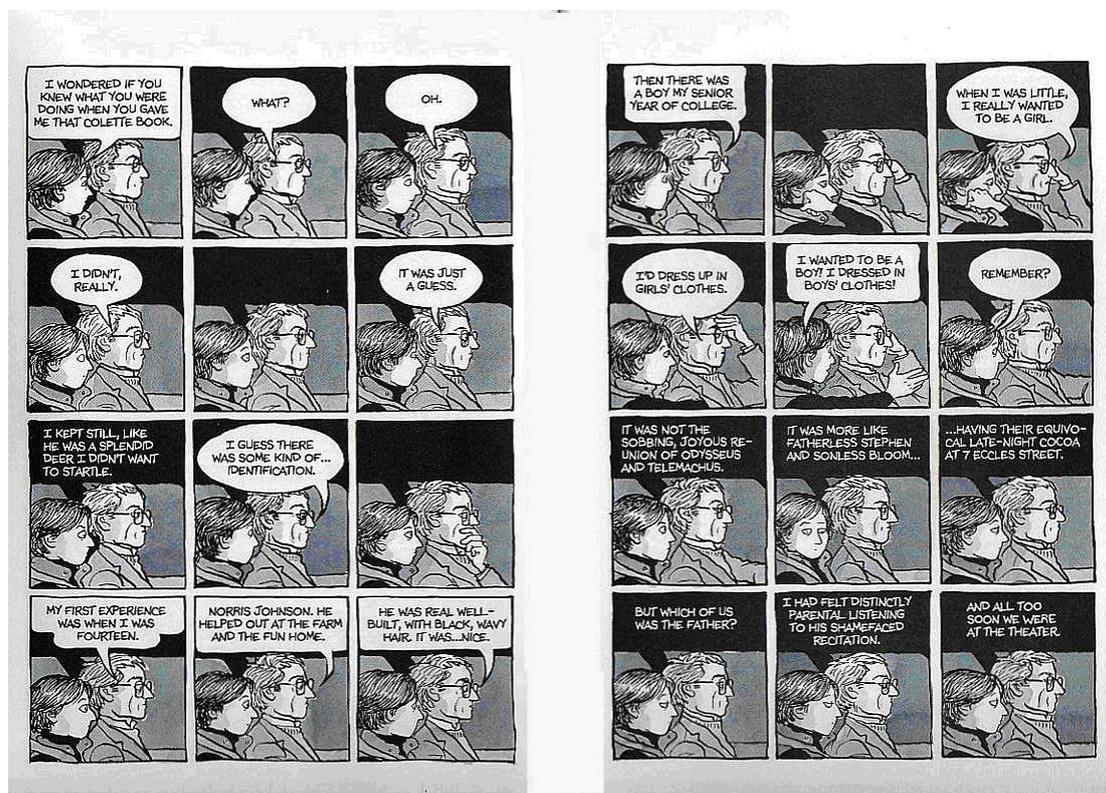
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The word “paratext” as first defined by Gérard Genette¹ refers to the peripheral writing associated with a given text, from title, footnotes and fore- or after-words to back-cover blurbs, author interviews and third-party comment and analysis. Referring to the art in *Fun Home* as paratext is, in a sense, just plain wrong, and doubly so: first, the art is not text, but then the word “paratext” has been stretched to include illustrations. More importantly, the art here is not *about* the work, being an integral part of it.

In the case of *Fun Home*, where a number of images such as pages from books and letters include more written text than the accompanying commentary, the blurring of the difference between written words and visual art might even make it seem debatable to discuss them as separate entities. They do however remain separate modes of expression: verbal vs. non-verbal, linear vs. non-linear, and—at least in a fairly typical perception of language vs. images, possibly ambiguous as opposed to supposedly non-ambiguous.

The interaction between these two modes of expression being what I have chosen to discuss here, it will therefore be necessary to consider them as distinct. Reading the images as paratext, i.e. as a supplement or an expansion to a written narrative, may well be a misreading, in the sense that the interaction goes both ways, but it is a deliberate one, grounded not only in this writer's natural bent as a linguist

rather than an art critic but also in a parallel brought to mind by the tension between these two forms of expression. Among other art forms that combine different media, another more familiar to this reader is opera, which combines words and music much as a graphic novel combines words and visual art.² In both of these dual art forms, the two different media can both combine and enrich one another and compete for the reader/listener's attention, with the effect that a balance has to be maintained so that neither prevails over the other. This tension shows in the uncertain way these dual-media works are described: an opera is nowadays³ thought of as a musical work rather than a literary one, although chronologically, the libretto is still written before the music; similarly, although Alison Bechdel is referred to as a cartoonist, *Fun Home* can hardly be described as cartoon art, which is mainly visual rather than verbal, captions being optional. To this reader at least, *Fun Home* is very much more a novel, that is, a verbal narrative with the art a feature added to the text—which was in fact written first—rather than the other way round. This admittedly biased reading is the starting point for exploring a few of the many ways in which the art enriches or counterpoints the writing.



One function of the visual art in *Fun Home* is to show rhythm and silence in speech, as written words cannot.

This double page, which depicts a conversation between father and daughter, signals the rhythms of speech and, more importantly, silence, much in the same way as a musical score.

The sequence is divided into twenty-four panels identical in size and structure, all of which show father and daughter in profile inside a car. Not all panels include text; the ones that do range from a single word to a full sentence of either dialogue or narrative commentary, but regardless of the amount of text or dialogue in each panel, the visual structure of the panel remains otherwise identical. This parallels the way a musical score is divided into bars of equal duration, regardless of how many notes each one includes. It also implies that, for each panel to be read as equal in duration, the panels with little or no dialogue need to be filled in with enough silence to make each of them last as long as a panel with a full sentence.

In other words, the use of a visual structure makes silence perceptible in a way that written words alone, by definition, cannot. Unlike musical notation with its precisely measured rests, written language has no specific signs for a pause or silence; its only recourse is to mention silence, with the effect of breaking it in the process.⁴

What makes this visual device remarkable is that silence, as the reader will know by this point, is a crucial element in this particular narrative, revolving as it does around what the father has chosen *not* to tell. This particular exchange is the only time father and daughter actually discuss their “shared predilection,” but true to himself, the father again spends much of this scene *not* answering or naming his experience.

The sequence starts with a question by young Alison, trying at long last to broach the topic of their common homosexuality, and is then divided into four movements – in the musical sense of the word – in which silence is a recurring motif.

The first quarter shows Bruce Bechdel evading his daughter's question about "that Colette book," a gift from her father that she is wondering whether to interpret as an indirect acknowledgement of what they have in common. This is denied: "I didn't, really." In the second quarter, oddly answering his daughter's silence rather than her question as she "[keeps] still, trying not to startle him," the father relents and starts to confide, but the acknowledgement is so vague as to be meaningless: "I guess there was some kind of... identification" (of whom, and with whom or what, is unspecified). Two former lovers are then mentioned but the nature of the encounters, again, is not quite named: the word "experience" or the indefinite use of the "it" pronoun (as in "it was... nice") transparent as they may seem, are nonetheless euphemisms.

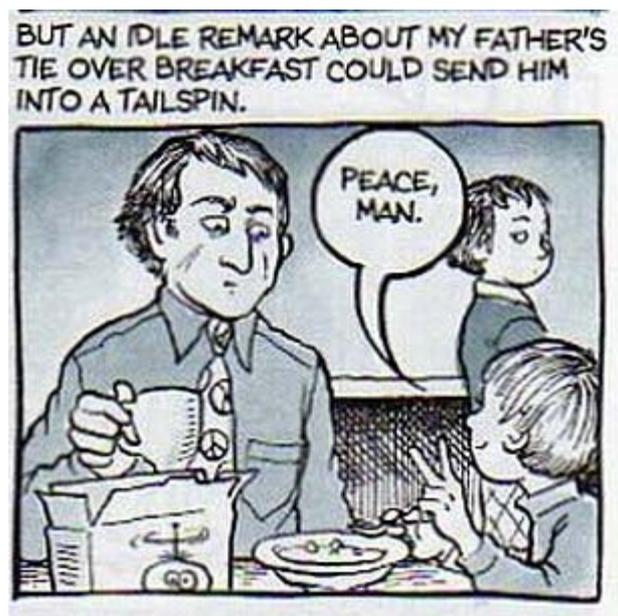
The third quarter of the sequence is the only one where father and daughter both speak, but no sooner does young Alison answer her father than the exchange breaks down: when she points out that her childhood penchant for cross-dressing echoes his, the father remains silent. Not a word is exchanged in the last quarter of the sequence, which shows father and daughter sitting side by side with Alison's narrative filling in the space over their heads and her voice taking over, permanently as it turns out, since this conversation is the last one on this particular topic.

What is remarkable about this scene, however, is how the silences are not merely shown in the several silent panels but measured too by the visual rhythm of the sequence. If the first, sixteen-word image is read as the time signature in a score, setting a fairly slow pace for the entire sequence, it is then made quite clear that even in this single exchange about such a central topic as the character's shared predilection, silence prevails.

Another frequent function of the art in *Fun Home* is to supply information without which the text alone would be incomplete. In other words, the art spells out⁵ – so to speak – what might otherwise not be clear, to make sure there is no room for ambiguity.

Generally speaking, the drawings are a very effective descriptive device, saving lengthy descriptions, for instance, of the painstakingly restored house which is such a prominent feature of the story, or making parallels obvious without too much explanation, as on page 24 where an Addams family cartoon is set next to a view of the Bechdel children and their mother, with both drawings visually structured by a zig-zagging banister.

There are many instances of the drawings filling in something that is not made entirely clear by the narrative. One illustration of this is the anecdote on page 18 of Bruce Bechdel being upset by one of his son's remarks about his tie: "Peace, man" would make no sense without the drawing showing said tie, bearing a pattern of peace symbols.



Under this heading I would also file all the documents pictured here as evidence, such as maps, letters, photographs, pages from novels and dictionaries, and so on, as well as the numerous little tags identifying specific details in the drawings which might otherwise go unnoticed or misread, or which the drawing cannot adequately convey.

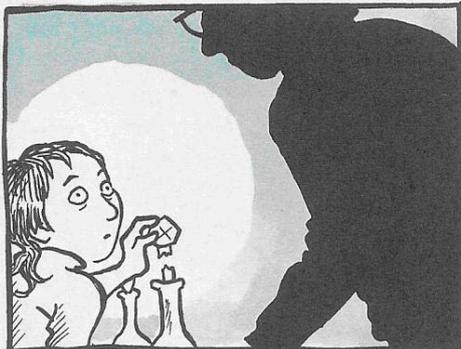
ROY TOOK US FOR A WALK WHILE DAD WENT UP TO THE APARTMENT. IN THE HOT AUGUST AFTERNOON, THE CITY WAS REDUCED, LIKE A LONG-SIMMERING DEMIGLACE, TO A FRAGRANCE OF STUNNING RICHNESS AND COMPLEXITY.



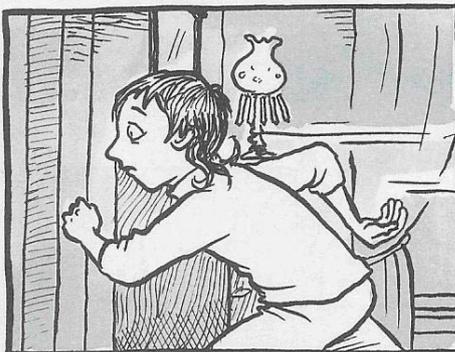
The New York City scene on page 103 is a good example of this, with tags identifying a variety of smells. Tempting as it is to ascribe this wealth of detail to the author's confessed obsessive-compulsive tendencies, a more interesting explanation suggests that this reveals the ultimate inadequacy to the narrative purpose of visual art on its own: lest the reader's attention go astray in the profusion of visual information accompanying the text, the labels seem to be used as the only way to ensure the reader focuses on the right details and reads them accurately: words, rather than illustration, appear as the safest way to sort through all the unsorted data provided by the art.

The art can also provide the reverse of an illustration to the words, providing a factual basis for comparison while the words draw out a metaphor, as in the Minotaur imagery on page 12, or filling in the blanks of a very abstract narrative, as yet another important “experience” goes unnamed.

INDEED, THE RESULT OF THAT SCHEME--A HALF-BULL, HALF-MAN MONSTER--INSPIRED DAEDALUS'S GREATEST CREATION YET.



HE HID THE MINOTAUR IN THE LABYRINTH--A MAZE OF PASSAGES AND ROOMS OPENING ENDLESSLY INTO ONE ANOTHER...



...AND FROM WHICH, AS STRAY YOUTHS AND MAIDENS DISCOVERED TO THEIR PERIL...



...ESCAPE WAS IMPOSSIBLE.



THEN THERE ARE THOSE FAMOUS WINGS. WAS DAEDALUS REALLY STRICKEN WITH GRIEF WHEN ICARUS FELL INTO THE SEA?



OR JUST DISAPPOINTED BY THE DESIGN FAILURE?

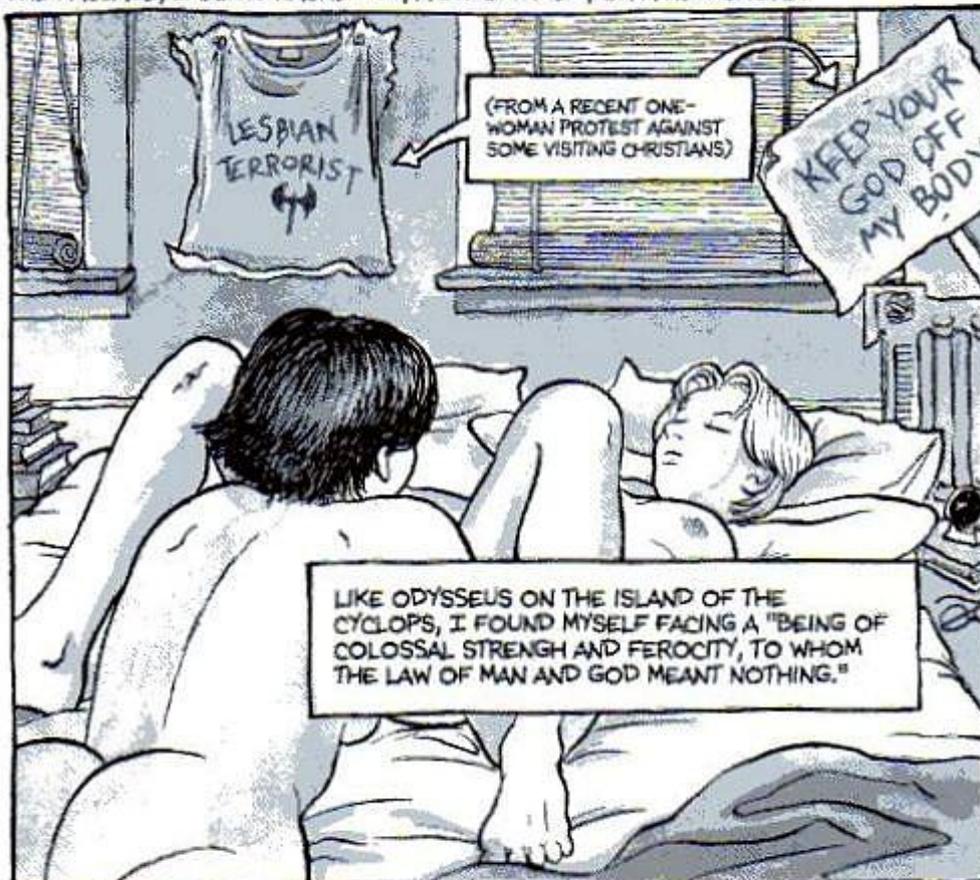


The panels in this page are a series of implicit parallels between moments of a childhood scene, which this reader suspects is more of an archetype than a memory of a single, real moment, and elements of the Minotaur myth recounted in the narrative commentary, told from the adult's perspective. The father's looming shadow in the first panel, for instance, is not named but interpreted as "a half-bull, half-man monster"; the description of "maze of passages and rooms" in the second panel explicitly refers to the mythical Labyrinth but also applies to the Gothic family house young Alison is seen to be running out of. She herself, in counterpoint to the myth, can be read both as the young Athenians who were offered in sacrifice, or as Icarus and Dedalus, escaping the Labyrinth. In the fourth panel, the art actually contradicts the caption, reading "escape was impossible," above a drawing of young Alison running down the front steps and out. No doubt the escape, in this case, is only temporary; in any case, rather than the art illustrating the words, the images here are literal narration and the words are images, suggesting much more than the fairly literal images actually depict. As above, the written narrative seems to be the only way of making sense of a childhood experience: the child's wordless distress is made sense of by the adult's words. It would seem here, that, contradicting this reader's original bias, the visual art came first, in the sense of depicting the earlier version of this particular distressing experience, but the words, so to speak, have the last word.

Interestingly enough, an apparently similar device used at the other end of *Fun Home* has almost the opposite effect.

The scene is a visually explicit description of the now adult Alison's first experience of lovemaking. In a sense, it is clear enough to need no verbal description, but again, rather than literal narration, the commentary is mythological: this momentous encounter is described in mythological terms, as a new twist on Odysseus's confronting the Cyclops (214).

VEERING TOWARD SCYLLA SEEMED MUCH THE SAFER ROUTE. AND AFTER NAVIGATING THE PASSAGE, I SOON WASHED UP, A BIT STUNNED, ON A NEW SHORE.



IN TRUE HEROIC FASHION, I MOVED TOWARD THE THING I FEARED.



YET WHILE ODYSSEUS SCHEMED DESPERATELY TO ESCAPE POLYPHEMUS'S CAVE, I FOUND THAT I WAS QUITE CONTENT TO STAY HERE FOREVER.



Again, a number of features in the actual scene are paralleled in elements of the myth, with Joan, Alison's lover, cast as "a bona fide Cyclops." Suggestive as it is, the choice of myth will not be explored in detail here, as the object is merely to point

out that, once again, in a narrative where some of the most important things remain unnamed, this particular encounter is not named as such.

Instead, the phrasing is oddly abstract, in contrast with the unambiguous visuals, and echoes a very different description of another first homosexual encounter. Marguerite Yourcenar's early novel *Alexis ou le traité du vain combat*. This non-graphic novel is well-known for the way it also refuses to name what it describes. The narrator's phrasing of his first sexual encounter is a perfect instance of the way this narrative describes experience in almost entirely abstract terms: "I can tell you about this only in a vague way; I was walking, I had no destination; it was not my fault if on this particular morning I encountered beauty."⁶ The encounter itself remains unmentioned except in a paraphrase: "what had so terrified me in advance,"⁷ which is very closely echoed in the *Fun Home* narrator's phrase "I moved toward the thing I feared." But the effect is the exact opposite of the almost coy discretion in *Alexis*: the visual art takes over, and if this love cannot speak its name, the art will at least show its face. Visually depicting the experience is a way of simultaneously not breaking the silence, and of revealing what cannot be named.

All this however merely begins to explore the more fundamental question of why this particular narrative needed to be a graphic novel, thus refusing to choose between words and art. It may well be that this fusion of the two is far from being "a form of art below [her] father's radar," as the author put it in one question-and-answer session, meaning roughly it was beneath his notice and not likely to be subjected to his judgment. Perhaps it can instead be seen as a way of combining both his areas of expertise, namely visual arts, in the recreation of the home he restored, and literature, which *Fun Home* both weaves in a great deal of, and is in its own right.

NOTES

¹ The word first appears in *Palimpsestes* (Paris : Seuil, 1982); it is defined in detail in *Seuils* (Paris : Seuil, 1987)

² Arguably, opera when staged includes visual and spatial dimensions. But these are incidental in the sense that the details of staging and costumes are left up to performers rather than

defined by the score and that, with increasingly easy access to recorded sound, most listeners have no doubt become used to thinking of opera as a mainly auditory experience, with staging an optional luxury.

³ It was not always so: until the eighteenth century, the dramatist rather than the composer was named as the main author of a given opera.

⁴ An alternate possibility in written dialogue is to use blank space or assorted punctuation (dots or dashes) to signal a pause, but neither can be precise about the duration of a given pause and seem more likely to be skipped rather than read as part of the dialogue.

⁵ The French phrase for this would be more literally appropriate: “*faire un dessin*”, i.e. to draw a picture.

⁶ *Alexis, ou le traité du vain combat*. In English: *Alexis*, translated by Walter Kaiser in collaboration with the author. 1984. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, p. 37.

⁷ *Ibid.*