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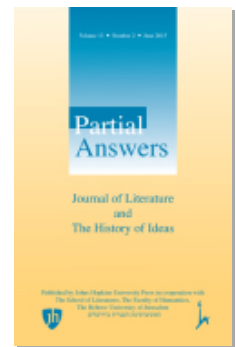
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## Du côté de Fun Home: Alison Bechdel Rewrites Marcel Proust

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# Du côté de *Fun Home*: Alison Bechdel Rewrites Marcel Proust

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## 1. Whimsical Drafts: Signs and Codes in *Fun Home*

Names, no doubt, are whimsical draughtsmen, giving us of people as well as of places sketches so unlike the reality that we often experience a kind of stupor when we have before our eyes, in place of the imagined, the visible world.

(Proust 1998a: 166)

In his 1964 book *Proust and Signs*, Gilles Deleuze reads Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* as a system of signs (84) whose final aim is not to retrieve memories but to produce knowledge. Deleuze argues that "[t]he Search for lost time is . . . a search for truth" (15). His illusions debunked, the Narrator gradually gets acquainted with the truth about things and people he has known for years. As a process of apprenticeship carried out through an accurate deciphering of signs, his search is "oriented to the future, not to the past" (4). *In Search* is an experiment in decoding; the Narrator's final epiphany in *Time Regained* amounts to the eventual systematization of the signs he has encountered in his lifetime. This analysis of Proust's masterpiece as a performative machine that discovers the truth through deciphering signs can be read vis-à-vis Eve K. Sedgwick's 1990 *Epistemology of the Closet*. During the *fin de siècle*, when, Sedgwick (quoting Foucault) writes, "the homosexual [has become] a species" (9), sexual orientation becomes the primary site of individual identity. In view of Deleuze's and Sedgwick's reflections, I would argue that Proust's is a search of the truth about (among other things) sexuality, or that the truth about one's own sexual orientation is one of the most telling truths sought in his novel.

This essay reads Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006) as a complex experiment in rewriting Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*.<sup>1</sup> I show that *Fun*

<sup>1</sup> The debt of *Fun Home* to high modernist literary classics is noticeable. Though rich in references to numerous precursor writers (Freedman 129), *Fun Home* privileges some of

*Home* can be read as both an epistemic and a performative apparatus of signs. Drawing on Proust's work as a quest for truth, in which homosexuality plays a crucial role, Bechdel does not wonder whether or not truth could be actually achieved — and whether time could effectively be regained. On the contrary, the epistemic role that Proust ascribes to writing, as clarified in *Time Regained*, is replaced in *Fun Home* by the aporetic fracture between words and images, a fracture that displaces the narrative elements in a circular and hence unending and perpetually open arrangement. Space and spatiality are key elements in *Fun Home*'s narrative economy: *Fun Home* is a text that produces “epistemic spaces.”

Bechdel explores and rewrites Proust's process of apprenticeship by unfolding the relationship between Alison, *Fun Home*'s protagonist, and her father Bruce as shaped by the desire to openly recognize and accept each other.<sup>2</sup> This pursuit ends in a failure: after they have reciprocally revealed their homosexuality, her father's untimely death interrupts their process of decoding and understanding their true selves, at its very inception.

*Fun Home* repeatedly splits the sequentiality of the events between an individual voice that narrates them and the apparently minimal and unsophisticated drawings that portray them, between a “narration above the panels told in the distanced and retrospective voice of a mature adult” and “the visual portrayal inside the panels of dialogue and events through the perspective of the child and young adult” (Freedman 131). This split represents the most valuable contribution that *Fun Home*, as a comic book, offers to the very act of rewriting. Drawings, indeed, replicate, counterbalance, sometimes deny, and often displace what is verbally expressed, voicing concerns that words are unable to utter (Lemberg 135), “filling the ‘gap’ between language and its subject” (ibid. 133). By visibly contrasting with the intricate development of the plot, *Fun Home*'s often oversimplified images create a meaningful tension within the text. Bechdel's “almost invisible” (ibid. 129) style sometimes turns the pro-

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the authors: Bechdel's references to Joyce, for instance, are multiple — Joyce is “the most ubiquitous” (Freedman 130) among the authors she alludes to. Proust's role is less visible and explicit, often limited to thematic and structural suggestions, yet Valeria Gennero points out that the very narrative structure of the book results from the merging of Proust's echoes with Bechdel's memories of her father (67). When asked about her relationship with Proust, Bechdel admits not having read all of his works, just taking the bits that she needed (Chute 1005).

<sup>2</sup>I refer to the author of *Fun Home* as Bechdel and to its protagonist as Alison.

tagonists of the story into silhouettes,<sup>3</sup> but also suggests that something complex and unfathomable must be dug out from under the smooth surface of her almost “cartoony drawings” (Lemberg 136).<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, Bechdel’s faithful (and, as she admits, painstaking; Chute 1007) reproduction of original documents (journal entries, notebooks, photographs) increasingly blurs the divide between reality and fiction.<sup>5</sup> The surplus of images supplied by *Fun Home* (including significant details of book and magazine covers, handwritten notes, doodles, and minutely rendered particulars of people and places) compensates for the words not said, for the “incommunicability between the characters,” visual forms being “endowed with a mobility that [characters] seemed to lack” (Chabani 9).<sup>6</sup>

A similar tension between words and visual images also operates in Proust’s linguistic and narrative economy of memory. Proust’s Narrator defines real life as a pale resemblance of a “book whose hieroglyphs [caractères figurés] are patterns not traced by us” (1993c: 275), which subsequently produce writing. This inner book, made up of signs and images and, for this reason, more ideographic/pictographic than phonological, discloses the truth the Narrator has been searching for, “however trivial its material may seem to be, however faint its traces” (1993c: 275). These

<sup>3</sup>Incidentally, actual silhouettes are drawn in a panel that emphasizes the Bechdel’s isolation and their constantly being “absorbed in . . . separate pursuits,” though living together (Bechdel 134).

<sup>4</sup>As Chabani suggests with reference to the first chapter, *Fun Home* is “devoted to the description of the deceptive aspect of façades, and, as appearances, images fall prey to the same critique. A tragic truth often runs deep beneath the opacity of such screens” (2). Gennero too argues that “the diverging trajectories of words and images seem to represent an aesthetic transposition of the fragmentation of the familiar relationships described by Bechdel” (68, my translation).

<sup>5</sup>Valerie Rohy frames her study on *Fun Home*’s queer archive with reference to Jacques Derrida’s *Archive Fever* (1995) and Lee Edelman’s *No Future* (2004), and argues that Bechdel’s obsession with archives eventually turns out to be disruptive and self-effacing, liable to be read as the expression of the compulsive death drive commonly supposed to inform queer cultures and identities (352–53 and 357–58).

<sup>6</sup>See also Gennero (71) and Ann Cvetkovich’s essay, which explains Bechdel’s attention to original documents as a need to create an “archive of feelings” whose main function is to carry “the affective weight of the past” (120). With reference to the use of maps in *Fun Home*, Cvetkovich argues, Bechdel’s “creative obsession and a desire to have access to feelings that remain elusive” (122) account for a kind of frantic quest for evidence. Moreover, relating this strategy to the theory of trauma, she hypothesizes the “potential ordinarieness of the unrepresentability” (121) as one of the ways to explain narrative and graphic strategies in *Fun Home*.

traces, (re)collected and decoded, are finally turned into the monumental book that the Narrator realizes he is able to write at the end of the story, the actual *À la recherche du temps perdu* that Proust compares to a cathedral.<sup>7</sup> The same route is taken by Bechdel in the process of assembling scattered chunks from her own past in a complex arrangement of words and pictures. A number of historical and formal reasons, however, preclude Alison's ability to envisage a final meaning in the events of her life. No final truth is ever achieved, and signifiers of *Fun Home* — both words and pictures that interrupt, contradict and refer to each other — never amount to or generate a closed apparatus of meanings. At the end of the book, in fact, her memories take her back to the very beginning of her story.<sup>8</sup> Instead of the luminous cathedral constructed through the Narrator's apprenticeship in Proust's novel, a dark, tortuous labyrinth is the only possible result of Alison's endeavors in *Fun Home*, a space whose signs turn out to be tricky and deceitful.

## 2. In Search of Lost Truths

No doubt it was the same thin and narrow face that we saw, Robert and I. But we had arrived at it by two opposite ways which would never converge, and we would never both see it from the same side.

(Proust 1998b: 209–10)

The narrative and rhetorical features shared by *Fun Home* and *In Search* are arranged around a limited number of themes, which help their protagonists to finally make sense of their own lives: the correlation between

<sup>7</sup> Proust's metaphorical use of the cathedral has been extensively discussed by Proust scholars. Diane R. Leonard traces the genealogy of this metaphor in Proust's aesthetic formation, connected with his intense reading of John Ruskin's works. In particular, Leonard sheds light on Proust's elaborations on Ruskin's visual and iconographic suggestions (44–45), and on the overlapping between the image of the cathedral and that of the book. As she points out, first "Proust adopts Ruskin's metaphor of the Cathedral as a Bible" (44) and then realizes that he can actually "create a book that could be read as a cathedral" (52). The issue of the novel as a cathedral is also addressed in Nicola Minott-Ahl's essay about *Notre-Dame de Paris* by Victor Hugo. Minott-Ahl points out the structural and symbolic similarity between the novel and the cathedral, and also the fact that the cathedral and the book instance the people's power to appropriate and reconstruct its own past and identity (257 and 269).

<sup>8</sup> Rohy notes how *Fun Home* posits itself in the epistemic space that sets historical evidence apart from fiction, exploring the inner contradictions of both. The archive collected and reproduced by Bechdel functions as a means to "defer meaning and . . . lead stories . . . into the coils of compulsive repetition" (344).

memory and writing; sexual identity as one of the means to define people's inner truth (or, on the contrary, the tool that they frequently deploy to disguise themselves under artificial masks); death as the event that helps the protagonists decipher the dynamics of love, desire, and attachment.<sup>9</sup> Both texts, moreover, feature the continual deferral/displacement of the final attainment of knowledge, and perceive truth as that which resists any attempt of appropriation. What Jane Tolmie argues about *Fun Home*, namely, that "the assumption that autobiography is truth in an unmediated way is something that Bechdel writes and speaks against" (85), applies to *In Search* as well.<sup>10</sup>

Memory and writing, (homo)sexuality, and death obsessively recur as themes in *In Search* (especially in *The Captive* and *The Fugitive*, the two novels Proust devoted to the story of Albertine). These same themes are deployed in ch. 4 of *Fun Home*, which the author tellingly titles *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*. This chapter clearly points out Bechdel's debt to Proust as it triggers that (unfruitful) quest for truth that underlies the efforts of both texts' protagonists.<sup>11</sup> Proust's *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower* (sometimes translated as *Within a Budding Grove*) stages the Narrator's transition from childhood to adulthood, fostered by his encounter and successive acquaintance with the "little band" of teenage girls in Balbec, where he spends the summer with his grandmother. Mirroring the Narrator's passage from one stage of life to another, *Fun Home*'s ch. 4 presents Alison's coming of age. This transition is in part prompted by her discovery of her father's homosexuality (79). Her shift from ignorance to awareness is paralleled by her simultaneous coming out to her parents as a college student in New York City.

Besides the explicit reference to *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*, the fourth chapter can also be read as alluding to (at least) two other novels of *In Search*, especially *The Fugitive*. In *The Fugitive* the

<sup>9</sup> On the motif of death in *Fun Home*, see, in particular, Christian W. Schneider's essay that reads *Fun Home* as a gothic novel and discusses the atmosphere of "Gothic Revival" set up by Bechdel (340).

<sup>10</sup> Literary works, mentioned for their affinity to specific episodes in Alison's life (read by *Fun Home*'s characters or drawn as objects), further question the attainability of truth, ultimately denying the existence of an original that comes before its innumerable reproductions: "The numerous references to fiction in her attempts to make sense of Bruce's and Helen's lives are a reformulation of the question of the original, an intertwining of reality and fiction in the quest for revelations, truth and meaning" (Tison 32).

<sup>11</sup> Moreover, ch. 4 "is a key one for thinking about this interplay of family histories" (Watson 38).

Narrator has to face his beloved Albertine's death and, later on, during his stay in Venice, he understands the dynamics of love and desire. After Albertine's death he realizes his deep and obsessive desire was triggered by the same force that desires knowledge: "One wants to be understood because one wants to be loved. . . . in seeking to know Albertine, then to possess her entirely, I had merely obeyed the need to reduce by experiment to elements meanly akin to those of our own ego the mystery of every being" (1993b: 670 and 674). Finally, he suggests that this knowledge of Albertine's most intimate secrets is excruciatingly and paradoxically hurtful, actually preventing him from loving her as he ostensibly desires:<sup>12</sup> "can we be sure that the joy we should feel in learning that she knows certain things would compensate for our alarm at the thought that she knows them *all*; and, however agonising the sacrifice, would we not sometimes forbear to keep those we have loved as friends after their death, for fear of having them also as judges?" (1993b: 689).

Death as a trauma and a nemesis also characterizes ch. 4 of *Fun Home*. Alison considers Bruce's death as a turning point in her own life. Arguing about the connection between the loss of her father and a change in herself, she muses: "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" (117). What kind of truth is she referring to? A tentative answer could be that, since her relationship with her own sexuality had been so far trapped in the grids that her father had previously constructed, his sudden death has set in motion a liberating process, not in terms of sexual choices but in terms of the public display and performance of Alison's sexual identity. The symmetry between her and her father (inverts and inversions of each other, their identities opposite and complementary; 98) is often seen as the only possible way for Alison to understand herself. After Bruce's death, this stable pattern is thrown off balance, and the chiasmic structure upon which their (mutually) deceiving self-representations were built is gone. Alison is liberated from the requirement to love in her father (also) the impossibility to speak out her true self. The first time she talks to a friend about Bruce's death, she bursts out laughing (227), so that her friend is convinced she is joking and refuses to believe what she is saying. The liberating laughter coun-

<sup>12</sup> In the last sections of *The Fugitive* the incredulous Narrator discovers that his dearest friend, Robert de Saint-Loup, is homosexual too. Disappointed and grieved by this discovery, he goes back to the moments of his life that he shared with Saint-Loup, retrospectively interpreting the latter's words and gestures as visible clues of his newly discovered sexual identity.

terbalances the sorrow of mourning: Alison now knows that the truth about herself (and the truth about the nature of her love and desire) can be fully expressed and that she can no longer represent herself as just her father's antithesis.

In Proust's *The Fugitive*, Albertine's death makes the Narrator aware of the nature of his love for her and of the operation of love and desire. The Narrator had previously created *his own* truth, in which Albertine's homosexuality was but one of the numerous fantasies he nurtured about her ("I said to myself, 'She is perhaps a woman-lover,' as we say 'I may die tonight'; we say it, but we do not believe it," 1993b: 694). Albertine's death, however, reveals to him *the* truth about her as concrete and unquestionable. He is finally aware that all his attempts to prevent her from meeting other women failed, given the real nature of her (hidden) desires. Bruce's death occurs immediately after Alison has come out to her parents in a letter she sends from college. Her mother's reply obliquely alludes to "another form that almost resulted in catastrophe" (78), and, when Alison asks her what she refers to, she informs her of her father's homosexuality. Later, Alison wonders if her discovery of Bruce's homosexuality is connected to his "accidental" death. She rejects any personal responsibility as "illogical" (84), but also argues that the reasons of this logical unsoundness lie not in the absence of actual causality but in the way Bruce had constructed his fictive identity: "however convincing they might be, you can't lay hands on a fictional character" (84). Not unlike Albertine, whose image was the result of the Narrator's assumptions about her and her desires, Bruce too is represented as the result of fictive projections, of multiple layers of identity resulting in the different personas he had designated for his public "respectable" self.

However, while Albertine's death reveals to the Narrator the truth about her sexual identity,<sup>13</sup> Bruce's death only opens up the possibility for Alison to start exploring his life, in the unfruitful attempt to dig out a perfect correspondence between appearances (i.e., signs) and meanings. The process of apprenticeship that Gilles Deleuze refers to as pivotal in *In Search*, proves ineffective and frustratingly useless in *Fun Home*, since signs ultimately produce not any truth but mere replicas of other signs. The chapter starts off with a presumably faithful account of Bruce's death ("he died gardening . . . as if he saw a snake," 89) but goes on with a tentative explanation of the conjectures and projections Alison

<sup>13</sup> After finding out about her death, the Narrator receives a letter from one of Albertine's friends, Aimé, which confirms his suspicions about Albertine as a lesbian.



used to make sense of her relationship with him. She hypothesizes that she was her father's favorite child because "he was attempting to express something feminine" through her (98), and, in so doing, implies a tentative comprehension between them, not acknowledged as such during most of Bruce's life but only expressed through hints and implications.

A crucial section from the chapter further displays the trickiness of deciphering signs. As a child, Alison goes to Philadelphia with her father. While having lunch, they spot a woman truck-driver, whose short haircut and masculine attire have a strange and at first incomprehensible similarity to her own: "I didn't know there were women who wore men's clothes and had men's haircuts. But like a traveler 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). As if the process of mutual knowledge between them had already gone a long way, Bruce, immediately recognizing Alison's reaction, asks her: "is *that* what you want to look like?" (118).<sup>14</sup> With no apparent connection, after this episode Alison mentions Proust, and the different ways in which the French titles of some of the *In Search* novels have been translated into English. She notes that *In Search of Lost Time* is a more convincing translation than *Remembrance of Things Past*, but it still does not preserve, according to Bechdel, the polysemic value of the French *perdu* (which means "lost" but also "ruined, undone, wasted, wrecked, spoiled," 119). A few pages before she has discussed the mistranslations of two other Proust titles — *Sodom et Ghomorre*, rendered as *Cities of the Plain*, and *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, which becomes *Within a Budding Grove*, shifting the emphasis, as she observes, "from the erotic to the botanical" (109).<sup>15</sup> Between these two digressions on Proust's titles and their English translations, Bechdel inserts two crucial episodes of her first attempt at dealing with her sexual identity. The first one recounts the summer vacation she spent with her brothers, when

<sup>14</sup>For an insightful analysis of the visual features of this passage, see Lemberg 135–36.

<sup>15</sup>Botany plays a considerable role in *Fun Home*, Bruce being portrayed as maniacally devoted to gardening. This is interpreted by Alison as a sign of his homosexuality (90) and mentioned in order to underline his resemblance to Proust ("If there was ever a bigger pansy than my father, it was Marcel Proust," 93). In *In Search*, moreover, homosexuality and botany are closely related: in *Sodom and Gomorrah*, the Narrator's discovery of M. de Charlus's homosexuality is expressed by complex botanical metaphors (though the Narrator disavows any "slightest scientific claim to establish a relation between certain botanical laws and what is sometimes, most ineptly, termed homosexuality," 1993a: 9). Further expanding on this parallel, Deleuze has extensively written on the "vegetal homosexuality" postulated in *In Search* (see, for instance, 174–75).

she asked one of them to call her Albert, instead of Alison, in what she defines “a precocious feat of Proustian transposition” (113); the second is about the trip to Philadelphia. The difference in the two episodes lies in Bruce’s presence: while her brother ignores her request (113), Bruce offers recognition.

By contrast, when Alison tries to make sense of her father’s identity, she is unable to fully decipher it. At the end of the chapter, she finds some pictures, in the first a young man who used to babysit her in his underwear, and in the others, photos of her father, including one in which he is wearing a women’s bathing suit. These panels are captioned “What’s lost in translation is the complexity of loss itself” (120). This enigmatic and apparently inappropriate sentence seems to express the failure of Alison’s attempt to decode Bruce’s signs. Translation always implies a loss, which questions the nature of the knowledge it produces. The repeated references to the multiple available translations of Proust are, in this sense, paramount as a way to voice Alison’s doubts about the possibility to retrieve and convey truth through accurately decoding signs and words.

Ch. 4 ends by suggesting that the tools that the protagonists use to identify themselves, and to fully understand the ties that connect them to each other, are deceitful. As is the case with Proust’s Narrator, who has to finally admit that the signs of the mundane world to which he used to be strongly attracted are illusory (one of the conceptual foci of *Le Côté de Guermantes*), the signs that Alison tries to decipher also fail to accommodate any substantial truth; they can, at most, instantiate “alternative life possibilities” (Watson 36).

### 3. Our Maps, Our Selves

“My dear,” said my grandmother, “I picture you like Mme de Sévigné, your eyes glued to the map, and never losing sight of us for an instant.”

(Proust 1998a: 308)

As suggested above, *Fun Home* features spatiality as a privileged lens through which identities can be perceived. The different spaces of the setting evoke distinct moments of Alison’s past life and condense her desires, discoveries, and regrets. Spatiality and geography, thus, provide the whole story with a tentative rationale, albeit a restrictive and provisional one. Bechdel even refers to her father’s and her own attitude

towards sexuality in spatial terms, imagining a “demilitarized zone” (99) where their interest in masculine beauty, as an object of either desire or identification, used to converge,<sup>16</sup> thus trying to clarify, through spatiality, those aspects of her relation with Bruce that are still obscure to her.

Bechdel herself admits that “*Fun Home* is very much about place” (Chute 1005); in ch. 5 she notes: “When I think about how my father’s story might have turned out differently, a geographical relocation is usually involved” (125). Geography is explicitly mentioned as a tool to weave together the different narrative threads of the story, and the whole chapter is interspersed with toponyms and maps. However, also the signs that refer to or reproduce spaces are ambiguous, like the other signs Bechdel collects and tries to decipher. Maps too, thus, are used as loose signifiers of displaced and, as such, unachievable truths.

*Fun Home*’s first map is reproduced in the second chapter, in which “a circle a mile and a half in diameter” (30) is drawn on the map featuring the places where Bruce lived, as a possible instance of his provincialism. The same map is repeated on page 140 (Fig. 1); however, here Bechdel emphasizes its circular shape as a mark of her father’s solipsistic existence (Chabani 4 and 6–7). When Alison realizes what happened to her father, her first reaction is to blame his death on the small town where he spent his whole life: “I’d kill myself too if I had to live there” (125). A map of the Allegheny Front, the mountain chain in Southern Pennsylvania that divides the Appalachian Plateau from the Ridge-and-Valley Appalachians, is given on the next page (Fig. 2), along with a text panel that explains that the Appalachians “historically discouraged cultural exchanges . . . despite the fact that people could easily drive around the mountains” (126).

In ch. 4, after finding out about Roy, Bechdel recalls her family trip to New York City. Bechdel describes the city, pointing out specific landmarks of homosexual life and activism, such as Christopher Street, where she imagines her father walking to visit her mother (105), and the Stonewall Inn (104), whose main entrance, along with the plate commemorating the Stonewall revolt, are accurately reproduced. No maps of New York (nor of specific areas in the city) are provided, though; the city

<sup>16</sup>The oppositions between the places featured in *Fun Home* also mirror the opposition between Bruce and Alison, whose characters are constructed and represented as instances of complementary polarities: “At the beginning of *Fun Home*, Bechdel portrays a series of contrasts between Bruce and Alison. . . . Very early on (in these panels, Alison is perhaps six years old), she defines herself in contrast to her father’s sensibilities. In other words, she is already reacting against whatever he is” (Brown Spiers 325).

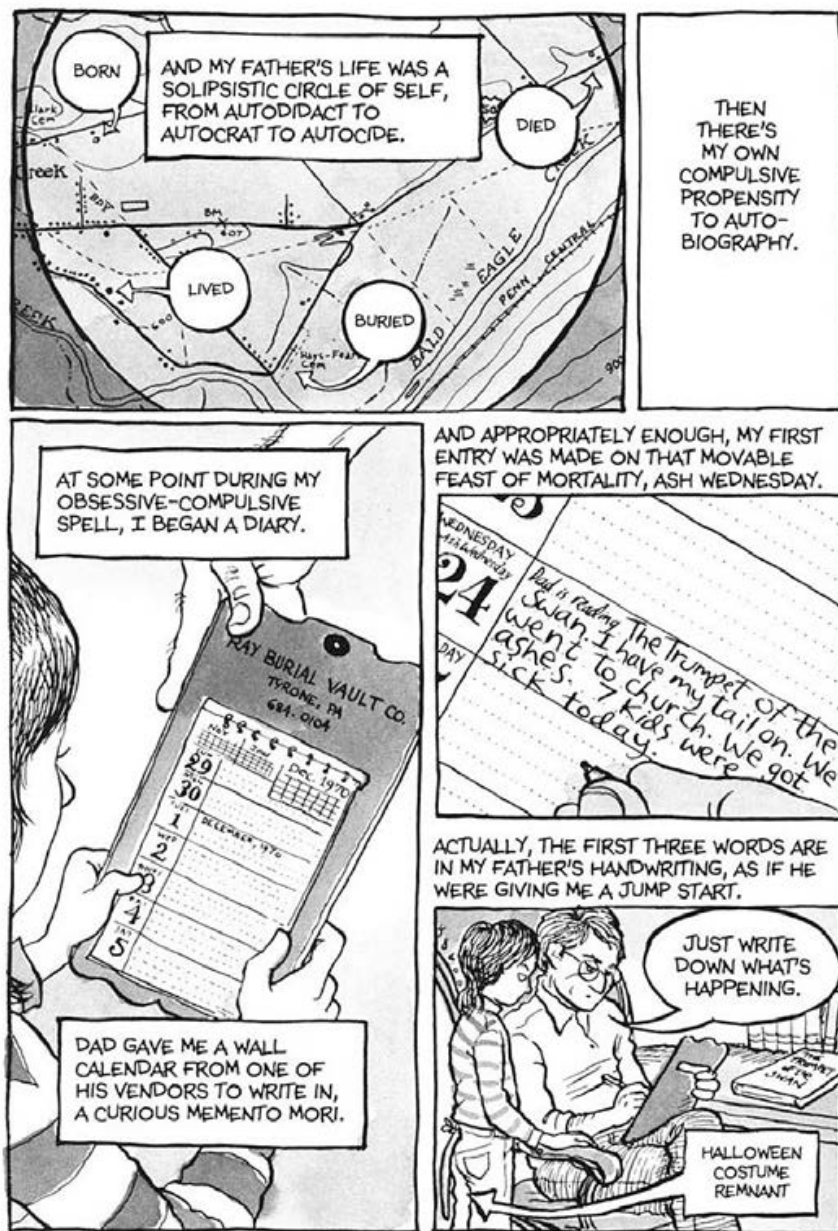


Fig. 1. The area in Pennsylvania where Bruce Bechdel spent his life.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> All illustrations are from *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, by Alison Bechdel. Copyright © 2006 by Alison Bechdel. Reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. All rights reserved.

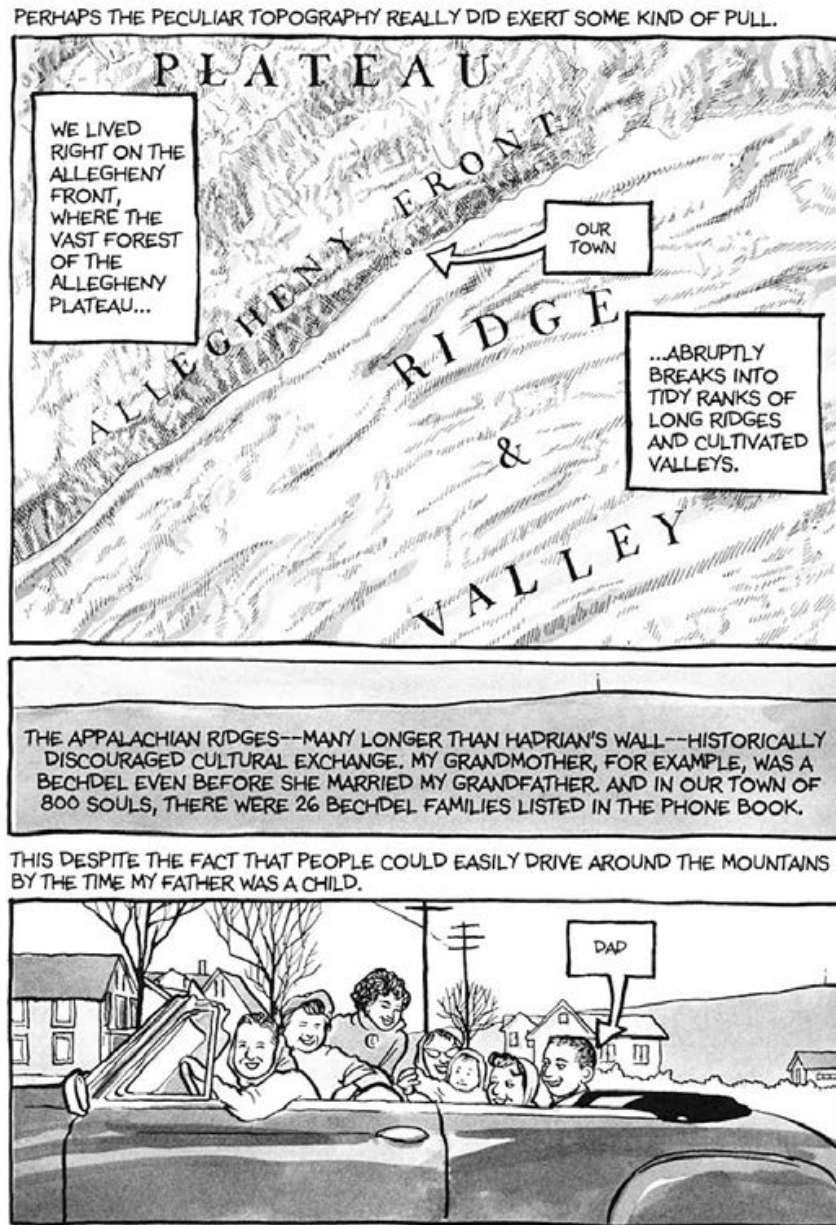


Fig. 2. A map of the Allegheny Front, in the middle of the Appalachians.

is evoked from the inside, from a flâneurial perspective. Since New York is the place where Alison comes to terms with herself as a lesbian, she tries to rely on her inner truth only, not on external signs.<sup>18</sup> Yet when she has to deal with the Appalachians, the impossibility of reproducing the open space of the region makes maps necessary, as abstract syntheses of an area that cannot be graphically and symbolically displayed otherwise. By opening ch. 5 with a broad panel of Alison in the woods, summoning her father (“Dad, c’mon, let’s go up the hill and see it,” 123), Bechdel underscores the need to map the non-urban spaces of her childhood, as if to provide them with a meaning that, as a child, she was not able to grasp. She will later understand how useless this strategy is, yet she cannot do without those very signs that sooner or later prove frustratingly inadequate.

Maps, thus, serve the book’s need to overcome the balance between words and pictures, which supposedly characterizes comics as a genre, by disputing the reliability of both (Tison 34), and showing that no objective portraits of reality or completely reliable accounts of the past can be given — memories, words, and images continually overlap and question one another’s authority and accountability.<sup>19</sup> As if to demonstrate how fatiguing and frustrating also *this* search for truth could be, on p. 146 Bechdel inserts two accurately drawn maps, one imaginary, taken from *The Wind in the Willows* by Kenneth Grahame (which portrays an idealized pastoral landscape), and the other real, truthfully reproducing the whole area of Beech Creek, with special emphasis on Route 150. Bechdel writes: “I took for granted the parallels between this landscape and my own” (146), which further underlines the complementarity of the places mentioned and drawn in the whole book. Further lingering on oppositions, Bechdel inserts one more cartographic panel that, though not an actual map, provides a perspective of a small area taken from the above. This panel, at the top of p. 147, strikingly contrasts and, at

<sup>18</sup> Sean Wilsey intriguingly suggests that Bechdel summarizes “New York City olfactory history” in a single panel: “she labels the smell on the corner of Christopher Street and Seventh Avenue South according to its constituent parts: ‘putrefaction’ for a trash can; ‘diesel’ for a bus; ‘menthol’ for a cigarette; ‘pastry’ for the exhaust from a chimney; ‘Brut’ for a pedestrian; and ‘urine and electricity’ for the subway entrance.” The unorthodox, metonymical perspective Bechdel chooses to describe the City, thus, sharply contrasts with the cartographic meticulousness of her portrayal of Beech Creek.

<sup>19</sup> Moreover, drawing maps is a strategy to smooth the harshness and the contradictions of reality, and “[i]t is precisely when she is unable to write that Bechdel locates drawing as an outlet for queer desires” (Lemberg 134).

the same time, summarizes the two maps displayed on the facing page, with its central element, the bridge: “the best thing about *The Wind in the Willows* map was its mystical bridging of the symbolic and the real, of the label and the thing itself” (147). Apart from the implicit reference to her own narrative strategy, which emphasizes “the importance of connecting things in very particular ways rather than just creating a linear, chronological model” (Brown Spiers 327), this passage practically calls for a Proustian reading. Bechdel, in fact, retrieves and elaborates one of Proust’s recurring patterns, the sharp contrast between the expectations raised by the name of a given place and the disappointing experience of actually visiting that very place (Venice, for instance, in *The Fugitive*).<sup>20</sup>

The passages that focus on the split between real and imaginary places or between actual places and their names, frequently insist on the opposition between New York and the Appalachians. The two places are associated with the polarities between which Alison’s and Bruce’s lives have spun. With regard to this opposition, sexuality plays a decisive role, all the more so since Alison’s choice to come out as a lesbian in her late teens<sup>21</sup> is pitted against Bruce’s choice to live as a closeted homosexual — regardless of the presumably free sexual life he had enjoyed in the past, in New York and in Europe. However, despite the ostensible opposition between Beech Creek and New York, a passage in *Fun Home* reveals that only four miles separate the small town where the Bechdels have always lived and Interstate 80, which goes to New York City (127). As a matter of fact, these two geographical and symbolic extremes are not as remote as they appear.<sup>22</sup> Spatiality, thus, unveils and refutes the alleged opposition between the two places, described and recounted as distant from each other and belonging to different symbolic orders.

This detail rewrites one of the turning points in Proust’s *Time Regained*. Gilberte, the girl that the Narrator had loved when he was a child living in the small village of Combray, tells him that they could easily reach Guermantes by going through Méséglise. Thus, the two places that

<sup>20</sup> See the sections “Place-names. The Name” in *Swann’s Way* and “Place-names. The Place” in *Within a Budding Grove*.

<sup>21</sup> Alison refers to New York as a potential “bohemian refuge” (107). Out as a lesbian by now, she ends up living in Brooklyn, far away from her native town, but also, symbolically, away from the Village, the area of the city she first got familiar with as a child, the vibrating heart of the city’s gay scene in the past.

<sup>22</sup> Bechdel insists on the importance that the construction of Interstate 80 actually had in her childhood, the Interstate being perceived as “kind of mythic” because “over the ridge from us . . . it ran from New York to San Francisco” (Chute 1005).

the Narrator had always envisaged as antithetical, both in topographic and in symbolic terms, are in fact connected to each other, and their rigid opposition turns out to have been an expression of the Narrator's psychological need to compartmentalize reality and its magmatic essence into distinct, though fictitious, signs. Gilberte informs the Narrator about the real topographic arrangement of a place that he thought he perfectly knew. Her words, which, the Narrator says "upset all the ideas of my childhood by informing me that the two 'ways' were not as irreconcilable as I had supposed" (1993c: 3–4), would also fit into Bechdel's topographic account of her past. Despite her attempt to segment reality into discrete and easily recognizable sections, the visual traces of her childhood turn out to be undefined and confusing in their resistance to rigid grids and signifying maps.

The section of ch. 4 in which she explicitly refers to this passage in Proust's novel also points to spatiality as a formal and structural feature of *Fun Home*. Bechdel mimics Proust as she describes "two directions in which the Narrator's family can opt for a walk," which, though considered "diametrically opposed" at the beginning, turn out to be connected by a "network of transversals" (102) in the end. The spatial simultaneity of the events narrated graphically appears as chronological simultaneity. The events of Alison's life are registered not so much as the unraveling thread of a continuous and chronologically ordered line as in terms of the different landmarks that produce a map of her own (and her family's) existence. Hélène Tison describes *Fun Home*'s structure as "alternatively, indeed simultaneously . . . horizontal and vertical, circular, open, exploded" (35). Miriam Brown Spiers argues, further, that "Bechdel's confusing chronology reflects the lack of straight lines that connect the dots in Alison's relationship to her father. . . . Perhaps, rather than being laid out in a straight line, *Fun Home* exists in a circle, more closely akin to the maps that Bechdel draws of Beech Creek" (327). Alison's troublesome quest is thus better displayed through a circular structure, which, uncanny and fatiguing as it may be, instances her struggle against the constraints of middle-class peripheral American ideology. By contrast, "Bruce chooses to live a traditional, linear life" (329), sacrificing the search of his own (individual and social) truth to conformism and public respectability, and compensating his emotional and sexual deprivations with his obsession for beauty, with an exasperated form of aestheticism.

Bechdel, moreover, explicitly emphasizes the connection between comics, spatiality, and synchronicity in the only passage of *Fun Home* in which she refers to comics as a genre; simultaneity is here regarded as



what chiefly identifies comic art.<sup>23</sup> The last chapter of *Fun Home* features another trip of Alison and her father; in New York, she meets some of Bruce's (gay) friends, among whom a cartoonist, Richard, catches her attention since he is illustrating a filmstrip about Pinocchio. He explains to her the reason for his choice of the comics: "I was getting really bored, but then I realized I didn't have to draw the pictures in order" (191).

Critics who have worked on space and literature have repeatedly stressed the paramount importance of spatiality in Proust. Mieke Bal, for instance, analyzes the relations between Proust's writing and visual art, focusing on the notion of flatness as the point "at which literature and visual art converge" (7). The whole of *In Search*, she argues, unfolding as a spatial — horizontal and reticular — assemblage of characters and themes, can be described as a "mottled screen" whose images, devoid of any pretense of objectivity, are generated and juxtaposed by the Narrator's different degrees of focalization. Flatness could both refer to the diegetic universe of the narrative, an open surface that can only produce "mirage of depth" (3), and function as a metaphor for the actual mediocrity of those characters the Narrator fantasizes about. Gérard Genette suggests we might read *In Search* as itself a space in which characters and episodes are connected not just by "horizontal relations of sequence and closeness, but also by relations that can be labeled as vertical, or transversal, by that sense of expectation and remembrance, response, symmetry, perspective, thanks to which Proust himself compared his work to a cathedral" (46, my translation). In his by now canonical analysis of the relationship between space and modernist literature, Joseph Frank makes a similar argument about Joyce's *Ulysses*, whose internal references and cross references "relate to each other independently of the time sequence of the narrative" and "must be connected by the reader and viewed as a whole" (18). When it comes to the experience of reading *In Search*, Frank maintains that the reader acts as a new narrator, insofar as s/he has to assemble different, and ostensibly non-related elements, scattered in the narrative, in order to construct his/her own narrative (26).<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Mitchell argues that *Fun Home* demands that "the reader/viewer move forward and backward in the text," panels being grouped "together into semantically charged units, or series" (§4).

<sup>24</sup> This analysis, together with the idea of language as itself marked by "primary or elementary spatiality" (Frank 44), could match the theories about comics and space elaborated in seminal texts about comic art such as Will Eisner's, which highlights the comic artist's need to come to terms with temporality, given the intrinsically spatial nature of comics (25–26); or Scott McCloud's, which, through a comparison between Western and Japanese art, refers to the need to "wander" throughout a work of art (81), asking the reader to assemble "a single moment using scattered fragments" (79).

However, whereas Proust's Narrator tries to make sense of his past by accommodating the minute fragments of his life within the self-balanced structure provided by his writing, the last panels of *Fun Home* reproduce the novel's very beginning, as in a circular conundrum that cannot be resolved.<sup>25</sup> The controversial relationship between words and pictures produces an endless displacement of any truth that facts, people, and places are supposed to convey in *Fun Home*: indeed, Proust's cathedral gives way to Bechdel's labyrinth.

#### 4. Displaced Homecomings

Yes, now that the knowledge that she was alive and the possibility of our reunion made her suddenly cease to be so precious to me, I wondered whether Françoise's insinuations, our rupture itself, and even her death (imaginary, but believed to be real) had not prolonged my love, to such an extent do the efforts of third persons, and even those of fate, to separate us from a woman succeed only in attaching us to her.

(Proust 1993b: 872)

Ch. 7 of *Fun Home* can be read as a rewriting of *Time Regained*. Both texts do not just operate as epilogues but also provide a new perspective through which the whole story can be finally observed and, at least tentatively, understood.

In ch. 4 of *Fun Home*, the trip to New York evokes the episode in *The Fugitive* in which the Narrator visits Venice for the first time. Both Alison and the Narrator are finally able to compare the city of their imagination with the one actually displayed before their eyes. Likewise, the very opening of ch. 7, when Bechdel remembers her return to New York, her passage plays the same strategic role as the portrayal of Paris that the Narrator provides at the beginning of *Time Regained*.<sup>26</sup> In both texts

<sup>25</sup>The closing panel almost literally reproduces the first panels of the first chapter, featuring Alison ready to jump and then suspended in the air, and Bruce catching her when she is falling down, thus hinting at the myth of Icarus, often evoked throughout the text, which also functions as a reference to Stephen Dedalus and, thus, to the labyrinth, as the only possible formal and symbolic pattern for the novel. As Brown Spiers suggests, *Fun Home*'s circular structure "emphasizes the connection, non-linear though it may be, between the beginning and end" (327). She also argues that the actual narratability of Alison's relationship with Bruce is granted by the medium she chose and to its ability to illuminate those "connections that would be obscured in a standard memoir" (319).

<sup>26</sup>The Narrator's comparison between Combray and Venice makes sense also in terms of knowledge: Venice is the place where the Narrator gets acquainted with an underworld of

the authors' relationship with the cities has changed because of the time elapsed, which has deeply affected both the cities and their perceivers. As the First World War approaches, Paris turns dark and undecipherable, and the Narrator, comparing it with the rural Balbec of his childhood, likens it to "a glacier in the Alps" or to "an oriental vision" (1993c: 66). *Fun Home's* ch. 7 similarly opens with a dark-inked sketch of New York and with Alison's words: "this time, at age fifteen, I saw the neighborhood in a new light" (189). Now that she is completely aware of the existence of a homosexual world, the traces of the gay life she is surrounded with during her stay in the Village are perfectly understandable. She even starts to conjecture that Bruce might possibly and obscurely belong to this world. Homosexuality thus helps her decipher the city (which, until few years before, was to her simply the place where her parents had met), providing it with a new, unsuspected meaning. On the one hand, New York's vibrant gay life makes her understand (though she has not realized it yet) her lesbianism, as she admits ("I did not draw a conscious parallel to my own sexuality . . . but the immersion . . . left me supple and open to possibility," 191); on the other, New York discloses what she perceives as the hidden and prohibited downside of homosexual life. New York's topography is now charged with meanings resignified according to the gay community's practices and institutions.

In *Time Regained* Paris is on the brink of the First World War; in Bechdel's narrative a new, unexpected threat is evoked, as frightening as war once was for the Parisian aristocracy portrayed by Proust. Bechdel remarks that her father died in 1980, a few years before the AIDS crisis exploded in the US, thus suggesting that, had her father lived into the 1980s, he would have been at risk (195). Moreover, had he come out well before 1980, Bruce would probably have never been a father at all, as Alison fantasizes in a panel on page 197, in which she portrays him marching in a gay parade. After this fantasy she finally asks a crucial question: "what is a father?" (197), urged as always by her need to look for a (verbal) site of identity and identification. Yet, after her fantasies

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whose existence he was hardly aware (see Hughes 162), and the contrast with the Combray that he remembers from his childhood, as the place where everything was (at least apparently) familiar and everyone was familiar with him, is all the more strongly perceived in a city that symbolizes everything that is unknown to the Narrator and where the Narrator himself is not known by anyone (Hughes 164). The New York featured in *Fun Home* is the place of knowledge and awareness, for both Alison and Bruce (Brown Spiers 318).

about her father's missed life as an openly gay man, this question sounds all the more useless and frustrating.<sup>27</sup>

Though the last chapter of *Fun Home* foregrounds the relationship between Bruce and Alison, the definitive recognition that readers probably



Fig. 3. Bruce coming out to Alison.

<sup>27</sup>The only definition she is able to find, looking up the dictionary entry, “conveys vagueness and distance” (197): *Fun Home* can indeed be read as “a quest for the dead father, in which the issue of his concealed homosexuality plays a central part” (Tison 26).

expect does not happen. Bechdel uses a tentative metaphor to suggest the failure of her last attempt: referring to the relationship between Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom featured in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, she says that "like Stephen and Bloom at the National Library, our paths crossed but we did not meet" (211). To further emphasize the impossibility of their final reconciliation she resorts to a graphic device. She and her father decide to go to the movies, and two whole pages, filled with squared, small, regular, and almost identical panels, show them in the car. Here Bruce finally comes out to Alison, but during this embarrassing conversation they do not even sustain eye contact (Brown Spiers 322–23), each of them unemotionally staring at an imaginary object in the distance (220–21, Fig. 3). Later on, Bechdel uses a scene from the movie they watch, *Coal Miner's Daughter*, as a metatextual trick that predicts what will actually happen. The movie is about "how Loretta Lynn makes it out of Appalachia to become a big country-western star," and a panel reproduces the final scene with the protagonist and her father hugging, the latter telling his daughter, "I ain't never gonna see you again", to which she replies, "Yes you will, daddy" (222). Whereas in previous chapters Bruce had from time to time tried to establish a connection with Alison, he is now aware that the only possible way to iron out their conflicts is by taking different paths; he therefore encourages Alison to move away. One of the final scenes of the book (229) reproduces, as if Alison were remembering it, a scene portrayed a few pages before, in which Bruce invites her to "learn about Paris in the twenties, that whole scene" (205), while handing her the volume of Colette's *Autobiography*. This is the first time in the whole novel that Bruce directly suggests that his daughter read a classic of lesbianism and imaginatively relocate far from home. Bechdel inserts the scene at the end of the story, and Colette's book functions as a gift and a farewell.

Of course, books, as Alison writes, always served as the privileged "currency" (200) between father and daughter. Ch. 7, in particular, is punctuated with references to Joyce. Bechdel cites the dyad of "fatherless Stephen/sonless Bloom" (221) as an indirect comment on the asymmetrical relationship between herself and her father. This deadlock, however, can be better understood in Proustian terms. Ch. 7 is partially devoted to Bruce's attempt to confess his homosexuality to Alison, since she had previously come out to him. However, Bruce's death confirms their inability to understand each other's worlds. The unfruitfulness of any attempt at deciphering the signs of the *other* sex is voiced by Proust's Narrator who, after discovering Monsieur de Charlus's homosexuality,

declares: “[t]he two sexes shall die, each in a place apart!” (1993a: 21). Deleuze interprets this biblical quote as a reference to “the two divergent homosexual series, that of Sodom and that of Gomorrah” (10).<sup>28</sup> By tracing a connection between the signs of love and the signs of knowledge, he mentions this episode to maintain that love cannot be experienced where knowledge is lacking. Alison and Bruce can do no more than acknowledge their respective homosexual identities: “We cannot interpret the signs of a loved person without proceeding into worlds that have not waited for us in order to take form, that formed themselves with other persons, and in which we are at first only an object among the rest. . . . the beloved’s gestures, at the very moment they are addressed to us, still express that unknown world that excludes us” (Deleuze 8). Bruce’s untimely passing away is “an epiphanic resolution, not an actual one,” since it “does not solve the mystery of [his] long silence or his suicide” (Freedman 138). Death as the only practicable though tragic way out of the impossibility to reconcile homosexuality and paternity could be read (see Rohy 358) as a symbol both of the death drive that straight culture has always attached to queer subjects and of the failure to decipher the signs of homosexuality. The echoes of Proust’s Narrator’s famous invective against homosexuals, at the beginning of *Cities of the Plain* (1993a: 21), resonate in the last pages of *Fun Home*: as a (finally) open gay father and lesbian daughter, the protagonists are doomed to die each in a place apart. The radical incommensurability of knowledge and love is the real hindrance to Alison and Bruce finally meeting on a common ground. The question of what — and where — the truth about love is, the Proustian leitmotif of *Fun Home*, thus surfaces even in the (apparently) least Proustian chapter of the book.

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<sup>28</sup> Charlus functions as an icon and an emblem, subsuming the whole world of male homosexuality, as Albertine does for female homosexuality: “Charlus offers [the Narrator] a reflection of the world he will discover in another form in the mirror of Albertine. It contains an inverted picture, as it were, of the Narrator’s final vision of reality, one where the intangible essence he will discover is tantalisingly locked away forever in the material world” (Rogers 88–89).

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