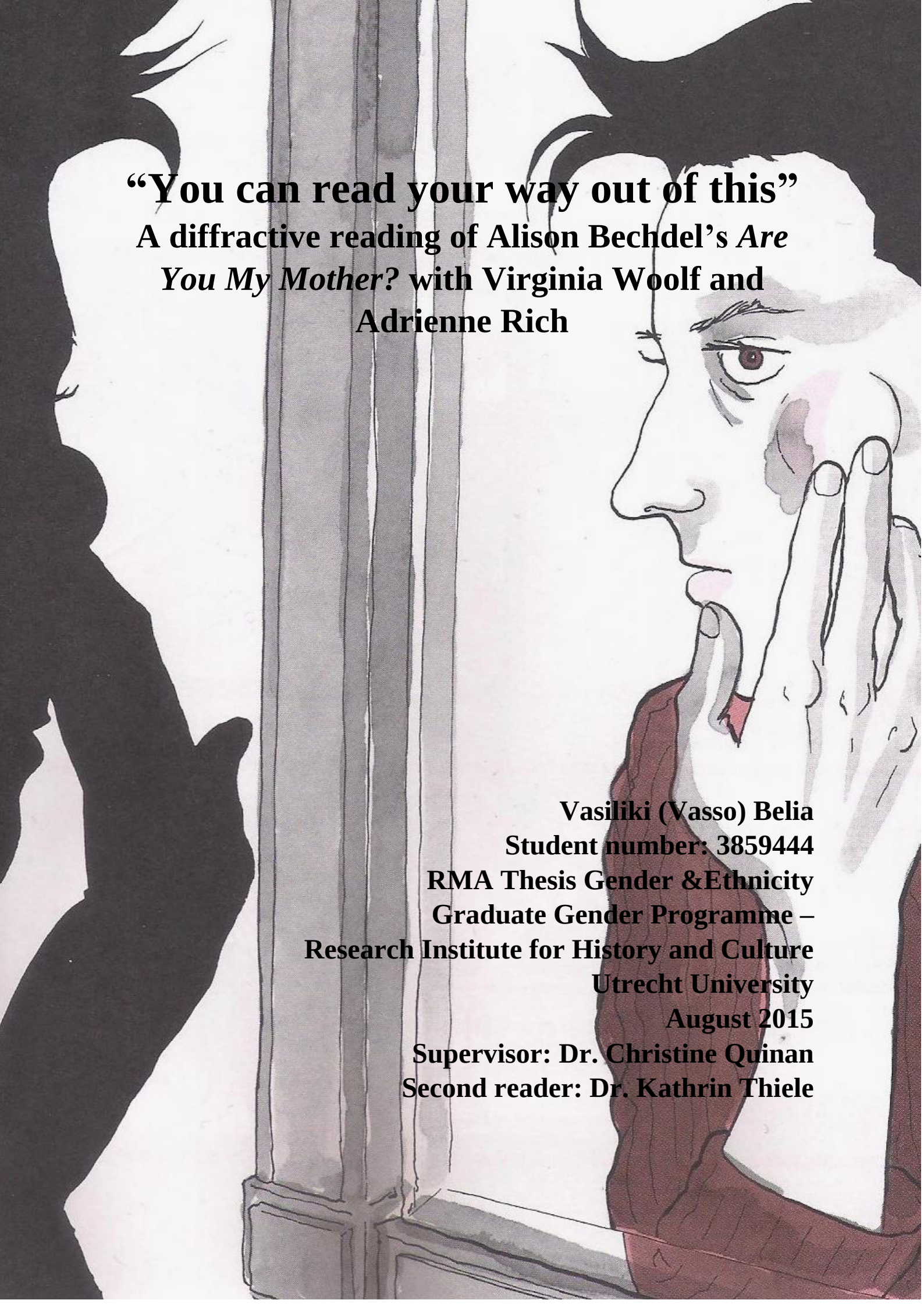

“You can read your way out of this”

A diffractive reading of Alison Bechdel’s *Are You My Mother?* with Virginia Woolf and Adrienne Rich

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August 2015
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Cover art: Alison Bechdel, Are You My Mother? (2012), 247.

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Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the entire Gender Studies Programme at Utrecht University for the support and inspiration I found here, but also for being the place where I learned the creative potential of affirmative reading, how to look for the onto-epistemological questions and how to fight to go beyond binaries. It is the main reason for the thesis' focus on the questions of the nature of reality and the nature of knowledge. I owe particular gratitude to Christine Quinan, my supervisor, for her unwavering trust in me, her support during my struggles with writing, and her invaluable feedback. Her supervision gave me confidence and made me feel safe, and I'm not sure I would have made it without it. To Iris van der Tuin, my mentor, for teaching me the new materialist perspective in knowledge production, for inspiring me, for helping me with practical things, and for her trust in my abilities. To Kathrin Thiele, my teacher and second reader, for the pleasure of our intellectual conversations, her general support, and for being a model of grace and empathy in her interactions with her students. To Vicki Kirby for the most intense intellectual stimulation in my life so far. To Rosemarie Buikema for reminding me of what is political about literature and art. To Birgit Kaiser for her generosity in giving me some of her scarce time to discuss comparative reading methods. To Domitilla Olivieri, for her great suggestions and feedback during the Research Design Seminar and after that. To Agnes Andeweg and Liesbeth Minnaard for their useful feedback on earlier versions of this text: they made a difference.

My thesis would not be the same if it weren't for the political situation in Greece, which never allowed me momentary relief from the guilt of being away and not active enough in political struggle, together with my precarious economic situation, which made studying in such an advanced programme very challenging. These two things together made me constantly question the need for the sacrifices and the importance of studying literature and comics. These doubts urged me to inquire what makes comics and literature political, in an effort to remind myself of the legitimacy of my

work, and they are the main reason for the thesis' focus on the question of the political efficacy of art.

A special thanks belongs to my professors at the University of Athens Aspasia Velissariou and Asimina Karavanta, who prepared me well for Utrecht and helped me muster the courage to come here.

I am blessed to have had the love and support from those back home who could not completely understand or be entirely happy with my decision to move to a place so far away from them: Maria Belia, Yiannis Belias, Marina Belia and Christina Torounidou, thank you. Ourania Tsiakalou, thank you for making it easier for me to be here by supporting my plans and being there when I did the work necessary to come to Utrecht. And for being there still.

It is hard to convey the depth of my gratitude towards my feminist community. It has provided a truly caring, holding environment, without which I would not have been able to write this thesis, but it has also provided a parallel political education of the kind you cannot find in an academic institution. I want to thank in particular my friends in and around Utrecht for practical and emotional support over the past years: sharing food, coffee and drinks, talking about politics, theory and feelings, moving boxes, sleepovers, holidays and of course feedback on earlier drafts of the text. Deborah Sielert, I don't know what I would be without you. Marianna Takou, Annemijn van Marlen, Whitney Stark, Anna Robinson, Né Fink, Vick Virtù, Alex Hebing, Ying Que, Lindsay Weber, Sarah Hamdan, Miriam Retter, Anna Gkiouleka, Aggeliki Sifaki, Archondoula Amanatiadou and Samantha Buijink, you have been a source of magic and power for me.

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Introduction

> *[My mother] threw me overboard in some way, you know, using me narcissistically… but then she threw me this amazing life preserver: "You can write your way out of this".* (Bechdel, 2014)

In this thesis I read Bechdel's memoir *Are You My Mother?* (2012) together with two of its literary references. The first reference is Virginia Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse* ([1927] 2000), which is directly quoted in the memoir. The second is a poem by Adrienne Rich, "The Roofwalker" (1984), which is one of the memoir's indirect references.[1] Alison Bechdel's *Are You My Mother?* (2012) is an autobiographical comic book about the author's relationship with her mother and the way it has affected her relationship with other people, texts and the world at large, both in her personal life and in her creative work as a cartoonist.[2] Virginia Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse* tells the story of what happens among family members and house guests at a holiday house during two days ten years apart from each other, but its main topic is the competition between two approaches to knowledge, an intellectual approach against a more embodied, affective one. It also has a strong autobiographical character, as the main characters in the novel are fictional versions of Woolf's parents, Sir Leslie and Julia Stephen. Adrienne Rich's poem is about the struggle of the poet to break free from accepted poetic tools and create new tools that are suitable for the politically informed poetry she aspires to create in the future. It is also autobiographical, because it discusses a personal issue the poet was struggling with at the time she wrote it.

[1] By indirect reference I mean that the poem is not in itself mentioned in the book, but the book in which it belongs, *The Fact of a Doorframe: Poems Selected and New 1950-1984* (1984), is.

[2] For the purposes of this thesis, I follow comic expert Hillary Chute in saying that comics is primarily a language and not a genre (not *one* genre) and comic narratives are –if marginally– literature, and therefore can be approached theoretically from the methods and concerns of literary studies (2008, 462).

I mention the autobiographical character of Bechdel's references for a reason. Bechdel's memoir has, by its author's acknowledgement, a therapeutic goal: she writes it in order to cure herself from her preoccupation with her mother, to break free from her mother's critical voice, and to re-establish a relationship with the world that is different from the one her primary relationship with her mother enabled her to have. She uses other people's autobiographical writing as an aid in her quest for a healthier, happier self. Woolf's novel provides her with a model of self-therapeutic autobiography. In fact, it was while reading Woolf's diary that Bechdel came up with the idea of writing her memoir as a means of letting go of her mother's grip over her. Woolf writes in her diary:

> I used to think of [my father] & mother daily; but writing *The Lighthouse*, laid them in my mind. […] (I believe this to be true –that I was obsessed by them both, unhealthily; & writing of them was a necessary act.) (Woolf 1980, 208)

According to Woolf, writing *To the Lighthouse* did for her what psychoanalysis does for its patients: enabled her to express a deep emotion, and through this expression she "explained the emotion and laid it to rest" (Woolf, quoted in Bechdel 2012, 18). During the writing of her memoir, Bechdel hopes it can have a similar effect on herself.

Adrienne Rich is a mentor figure, encouraging Bechdel's work through her books and letters personally addressed to Bechdel, and setting an example of doing politics through art. Rich's work, essays and poetry, is used by Bechdel in order to argue, contrary to her mother's belief, that personal writing has an important value for society at large. Bechdel, influenced by the psychoanalytic theory of Donald Winnicott, associates political compliance with the unhealthy compliance to parents that children who have had a faulty or errant upbringing exhibit. Bechdel refers to Rich to argue that her personal writing is political the way Rich's was, in order to counter her mother's argument that "the self has no place in good writing" (Bechdel 2012, 200) and to show that with her work she is part of the feminist lesbian tradition of writers who do politics by writing the self in history and bringing the experience and issues that concern women and lesbians in popular culture. Thus, she hopes she can alter her "compliant" relationship with her mother and the conservative structures in society which her family represents, making a step toward healthy disobedience.

Bechdel has said in an interview that her mother has taught her the power of writing to affect change in one's life: "you can write your way out of this" (Bechdel and Thurman, 2014, 59.10-59.30), meaning out of the pain her mother has caused her by being responsible for Bechdel's personality. With *Are You My Mother?* she makes it clear that not only her mother, but also a number of literary figures paved the way for her work, among whom it is Woolf and Rich who play the most important role in the memoir.

I first read *Are You My Mother?* while I was working on a paper about literary genealogies, that is, the study of relations of continuity and influence among writers of different generations, and the theoretical reflection on their consequence in literary production. Literary genealogies were an important focus of literary theory in the 1970s and 1980s, but have lost scholarly interest since the 1990s, and then lost my interest too, for reasons which I will explain shortly. Whether they are the examination of continuity or competition among poets within the so-called Western canon (Bloom [1973] 1997, 1994), or more politically radical examinations by feminist scholars of the relationship of women writers with writers that are supposed to be part of and represent this canon (Gilbert and Gubar 1979), literary genealogies tend to rely on psychoanalytic theories, and to form analogies between artistic influence and familial relationships. These models necessitate a reading of texts which emphasizes the distinction between writers, focuses on their artistic subjectivity and celebrates their originality; or, on the contrary, a reading that describes literature as springing from a state of pre-lapsarian unseparatedness, and thus celebrates an idealized notion of belonging-together and of an absence of competition and hostility within a realm where there is no differentiation (Doane and Hodges 1987, 89-92). The use of family metaphors, which were used in literary genealogies, fell out of favour with literary scholars in the late 1980s and early 1990s, mostly because of the queer, lesbian and postcolonial critique they met: family metaphors were found to depend on heterosexuality and family relations specific to white Western cultures and not of those which colonialism suppressed (Wall 2005, 13 and Wilson, 1992, 76).[3] However, even when arguing against genealogy models, many authors use its conventions (van der Tuin 2014, 42). Abandoning the question of genealogies in literature did not mean

[3] See also Judith Butler's critique of origins in the form of oedipal narratives and matriarchal pro-oedipal narratives. They serve conservative aims, she argues, and restrict the future (Butler 1999, 47-48).

the end of the basic assumption behind it, namely that relationships between texts written at different times follow a linear temporality of influence that goes from the older to the newer text.

Bechdel's memoir lends itself to an analysis of how literary influence works. With its explicit allusions and the special place it reserves for writers of previous generations, it looked like a useful case study for my examination of literary genealogy models. But Bechdel's critique of the institution of motherhood and the structural oppressions at work in intra-familial dynamics resonated with the queer critique of such models, and made me change my project from revisiting genealogy models to looking for methods for reading texts together that do not assume that texts can only affect other texts by being chronologically prior and finding their way to the bookshelves of the future writers. It made me wish to read Bechdel together with Woolf and Rich, in a way that does not simply examine how having Woolf and Rich in her library made Bechdel produce this particular work of art, but treats the texts as if they met for the first time. This way Woolf's and Rich's work is relevant and effective in the present and future, without being treated as the seat of authority that Bechdel sometimes makes them be. This is particularly important as Woolf and Rich are canonical literary figures, whereas Bechdel's work, though very popular, still belongs in the margins of literature. Their respective positions can make a reading that focuses on the influence conferred on Bechdel by the older writers dangerous: it may look like an attempt to legitimize Bechdel's work by association, or sound patronizing toward her.

Just like Bechdel writes her memoir in order to break free from the oppressive influence of her mother without sacrificing the good things her mother has offered her, I am writing this thesis in order to show how we can make use of previous generations of writers, without putting ourselves in the position of "daughters" who have to either free themselves from parental authority or be dutiful to it. I am using the method of diffractive reading, as developed by feminist philosopher and theoretical physicist Karen Barad, because feminist epistemologist Iris van der Tuin, in making a case for generationality in feminism, argues that diffractive reading is suitable for affirming and strengthening links between writers without fencing them away from each other in distinct temporalities, and for reading them through one another without hierarchizing one over the other (van der Tuin 2014, 97). Reading Bechdel's memoir diffractively with Woolf and Rich is like an experience where

Bechdel and I together contemplate the possibilities of reworking intergenerational relationships in a way that allows for keeping the past alive, indeed revitalizing it, while avoiding its patronizing restrictions on the present. This is why the title of the thesis takes Bechdel's quote, which describes the ambiguous relationship with a mother that is both to blame and to thank for Bechdel being who she is, and substitutes "write" with "read": "you can read your way out of this". I want to argue that there is a way for feminist writers and literary scholars to create, through diffractive reading, a vibrant relationship with the feminist (and not only) past in a way that does not reproduce distinctions and generalizations, and does not foreclose possibilities of imagining the past differently.

In the methodology chapter I explain how I diffractively read Bechdel out of the problematic relationship to the world her mother has thrown her in. I explain the origins of diffraction in quantum physics and feminist philosophy, as well as the reasons I believe it can be a productive tool for the literary analysis of the specific texts. I also argue that the character of literature and graphic narrative requires an adapted form of the method, which takes into account the literary experience of reading. For that purpose, I bring in the theory of literary scholar Louise Rosenblatt, whose approach to literary reading also bears the epistemological influence of quantum physics.

The methodology chapter is followed by two literary analysis chapters, each of which brings in a literary reference of Bechdel's –the first chapter brings Woolf and the second Rich– to "help" Bechdel rework her relationship with her mother, herself, creativity, other people and the world. But they "make use" of the other writer in a way different than Bechdel does in her memoir. The older texts are not used as models for doing autobiography or for their prestige, which reflects on the quality and value of Bechdel's work. Instead, my diffractive reading of Bechdel with Woolf is a graphic-literary-philosophical reflection on the nature of external reality and the question of knowledge, which can "cure" Bechdel from the epistemological crisis (her extreme self-consciousness and chronic doubt about the reality of her experiences) that an erratic upbringing has brought upon her. My diffractive reading of Bechdel and Rich enables Bechdel to practice a politics of art that is not characterized by her usual overemphasized intellectualism, but instead by an embodied affective creative apperception, which Bechdel associates with psychic health.

Methodology

As established in the introduction, this thesis investigates and brings to existence what happens during an encounter between Alison Bechdel's *Are You My Mother?* and Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, as well as between *Are You My Mother?* and Adrienne Rich's "The Roofwalker". In order for these encounters to be treated as events that take place during my reading, and not as a fixed relationship between the texts, I need a method of reading that addresses not the influence that can be traced in the text as an effect of the fact that the writer has read these other texts, but rather an influence that appears when a reader reads them together. In this chapter I intend to explain why diffraction as a reading methodology enables one to read texts together in such a way. I will offer a short overview of how the term "diffractive reading" was first coined, how the method was developed and how it has been used so far. Then I will proceed to explain the reasons I believe it can be a productive tool for literary analysis, how the character of literature and graphic narrative require an adapted form of the method which takes into account the literary experience of reading, and why it is suitable for what I want to do with my thesis.

Diffractions/Transactions

Diffractive reading is a reading methodology that originates in feminist philosophy. The first person who used the term "diffraction" in a way that can account for how texts acquire and produce meaning is Donna Haraway, in her work *Modest_Witness@Second _Millennium.FemaleMan©_Meets_OncoMouse*™ (1997). Talking about scientific objectivity and the production of knowledge, Haraway argues for replacing the optical metaphor of reflection with that of diffraction, because diffraction does not reproduce sameness, like in what has come to be called the

representationalist paradigm,[4] but shows patterns of difference and their importance (1997, 16). The use of reflection as a metaphor is very common in Western philosophy and science and has even dominated feminist and other critical discourses around strong objectivity and situated knowledges, to the extent that they propose self-reflexivity as the solution to the problem of the self-invisible objective scientist (ibid., 16 and 33). Reflexivity, however, cannot help us escape the Scylla and Charybdis of realism and relativism, since, like reflection, it "only replaces the same elsewhere, setting up the worries about copy and original and the search for the authentic and really real" (ibid., 16). In other words, a reflexivity that makes the knower interrogate how their position in the world affects their perception of it, may question the realist idea of objectivity (one can only know how things appear from their position) but continues to ignore their participation in the making of the world as it is. Haraway's metaphor of diffraction departs from the notion of self-reflexivity to the extent that the latter asks for an examination of what role the knower's position in the world (gender, class, race, species, nation, and so on so forth) plays in the production of knowledge, but takes for granted such identity markers and the knower's pre-established position as the subject in the practice of knowing. Diffraction, on the contrary, not only accounts for the subject's position but is also a practice that reconstitutes the markers of this position and the relationship in which knowing engages both the knower and the known in unforeseeable ways. Diffraction is a knowledge-making technology that not only "makes a difference in the world", but also "craft[s] subject positions and ways of inhabiting such positions" while making its own work "relentlessly visible and subject to critical intervention" (ibid., 36). This productive dimension of Haraway's diffraction is taken up by Aud Sissel Hoel and Iris van der Tuin who argue that looking specifically at the reading of texts as a diffraction means that we acknowledge that "texts and readings cannot be seen as

[4] The basic tenet of the epistemological position of representationalism, also known as the representative theory of perception, is that subjective sensations, or else sense-data, are representations of physical objects, which are considered to be the causes of the sense-data. The physical objects, therefore, are considered to exist independently of our sensations, but it is through the sensations that we may know them, albeit indirectly (Bunnin 2004, 603). The consequence of this approach to the problem of the external world is that there is a separation between the sensations and the world, in the sense that external objects are the occasion for perception, but our perception is distinct from it: it is only the perception we have direct epistemological access to, whereas the external objects we cannot immediately know, let alone affect through our practices of knowledge. Representationalism is also known as epistemological dualism because practices of knowledge and the objects of knowledge belong in different planes of existence, are ontologically different (Honderich 1995, 171).

separate or separable from what we tend to accept as that to which they refer" (2013, 189). I would add that looking at reading as a diffraction also means that the reader of a text cannot be seen as separate or separable from the literary work she reads but is conditioned by it and becomes part of it. I will explain this further in the next section, using the theory of reading developed by literary scholar Louise Rosenblatt.

Rosenblatt makes an argument about the relationship between reader and text that is quite similar to my reading of Haraway's diffraction. She moves away from the realist understanding of texts, informed by the same shift in Western epistemology which informs Haraway's work. With her transactional theory of reading, developed in the late 1930's but given its name three decades later, Rosenblatt answers the centuries-old question "where is the meaning of the text located?" in a way which signals the emergence, in literary studies as well as in the sciences in general, of a new scientific paradigm. In Rosenblatt's own words her theory of reading is a movement within a more general shift "in the whole way of thinking about human beings in the natural world and their knowledge of it." (Rosenblatt 1985, 97) The shift she talks about is the shift away from the paradigm in which Newtonian physics belongs: a paradigm which endorses a dualistic view of human beings as separate from nature and which seems to come to an end with the early 20th century developments in physics, namely subatomic and quantum physics.

Rosenblatt adopts the term "transactional" to describe literary reading as event after she reads John Dewey and Arthur F. Bentley's philosophical treatise *Knowing and the Known* (1949), in which developments in physics, biology and other sciences between the late 19th century and the mid-20th century are viewed as an opportunity for reconsidering predominant approaches to epistemology and for adopting a philosophical terminology that reflects them. Dewey and Bentley examine in particular the transformation of viewpoints that takes place in physics in the early 20th century, because they believe that the approach they propose toward the question of knowing and knowns had already been developed by contemporary physicists (1949, 135). The term transaction, employed in physics to describe a certain manner of observation, denotes an epistemological approach according to which the knower and the known are not separate entities that pre-exist an observation, but they emerge together during the event of the observation/transaction. In contrast with transaction, the term interaction suggests the classical Newtonian approach according to which the

world consists of separate already-defined entities which act on one another, and scientific observation does not change the nature of the objects observed. In the emerging scientific paradigm, on the other hand, the observer is always already part of the object of observation, so that acts of observation actually change the ontology of the things observed.

Rosenblatt argues that the fact that she, a literary scholar, is informed by the current view of science as "an interpretive endeavor, in which the observer must be taken into account in the observation and absolute objectivity is unattainable" attests to her purpose to "counteract the tendency toward polarization of art and science and to stress their complementary contributions" (Rosenblatt 1995, xviii-xix). Indeed, as Karen Barad argues, quantum physics "shook the very foundation of Western epistemology" (Barad 2007, 97): once science has called into question the Cartesian view of knower and the known as inherently distinct, our view of knowledge in general must change, and, consequently, the idea of what knowledge is within literary theory, namely textual understanding (or meaning-making), cannot fail to be affected too.

Let us come back to the question of where textual meaning is located, under the light of this epistemological framework: in Rosenblatt's transactive theory of reading the work of literature is in fact the transaction between the text and the reader. It is located neither in the written words on the page nor in the reader's mind. Indeed, from the epistemological point of view of the "new paradigm" Rosenblatt talks about how a reader and text emerge together during the reading event, during which "each component […] functions by virtue of the presence of the other" (Rosenblatt 1978, 14). Then, "the boundary between inner and outer world breaks down" (ibid., 21) and "sharp demarcation between objective and subjective becomes irrelevant" (ibid., 18). Reader and text "each forms an environment for the other" (ibid.), meaning that each responds to the stimuli of the other, and they are both conditioned by being created in the other. This means that on behalf of the reader their previous experiences affect the literary work created in the moment of reading, and on behalf of the text its clues lead to a change in the reader as the reading comes to be added in the reader's life of experiences, an experience that goes outside and beyond their world as experienced thus far (ibid., 21). Such clues that make the event of reading a specific experience are the clues that make the reader take on the efferent or the aesthetic stance toward what

she experiences. Rosenblatt differentiates between reading for extracting information from a text, which she calls efferent reading, and reading for the sake of experiencing what happens during the actual reading. The two stances are usually both present during any kind of reading, and they are rather two ends of a continuum than a binary. It is the aesthetic stance, however, that allows the event that is the literary work to take place, by creating a distance from "reality" in order for the words and images of the text to be the reality during the event (ibid., 22-31). This event is the poem, the novel, the short story, and, I will add, the graphic narrative. The consequence of this approach is that the text is not fixed and one, but variable and multiple.

Rosenblatt is considered by some to be the first reader-response theorist, because with her first book on the subject, *Literature as Exploration*, published in 1938, she shifts the attention of analysis from the formal qualities of the text to the diversity of the readers' responses. Doing this, she breaks with the tradition of New Criticism, the formalist literary approach predominant at the time. However, she differs from the majority of reader-response theorists of the 1970s and 1980s (who often claim her as their antecedent) and the poststructuralist literary theorists who also pointed out that the meaning of the text depends on the reader, because she does not believe that any possible response to a literary text is equally valid and valuable. In contrast with them, she places great emphasis on the role of the text to determine meaning as well. With her article "The Transactional Theory: Against Dualisms", written in 1993 in response to a number of literary criticism anthologies that position her in close theoretical relation with the reader-response theorists and the poststructuralist critics, she makes sure to differentiate herself from both. In the poststructuralists' relativism she sees a hierarchization of the subject/reader to the detriment of the object/text: even if the subject/reader is not considered to be the unitary liberal subject but is a subject position in the web of structures that determine textual interpretation, the power of meaning-making lies with the reader. This way of thinking belongs with the Newtonian mechanistic paradigm, according to which knowers and knowns belong to different spheres of existence whether the one or the other is given priority (Rosenblatt 1993, 380). For Dewey and Bentley, however, there is "no knower to confront what is known as if in a different, or superior, realm of being or action; nor any known or knowable as of a different realm to stand over against the knower". There are "no 'entities' or 'realities' of any kind, intruding as if from behind or

beyond the knowing-known event, with power to interfere, whether to distort or to correct" (Dewey and Bentley 1949, 136). Rosenblatt also disagrees with the (non-poststructuralist) common reader-response theory assumption that readers are psychological unities that pre-exist their engagement with the text. The reader is conditioned by the text at the moment of reading, so that there can be no (same) reader before this moment.

It is ironic, therefore, that Rosenblatt is considered by some to be a reader-response theorist, because for a reader-response theory to exist, Rosenblatt's theory must be suppressed. In Steven Mailloux's words: "Rosenblatt's prior dismantling of the reader/text distinction had to be ignored in order for a certain kind of theoretical work to be done, and that theoretical work needed to be done, it was thought, in order to provide a foundation for reader talk in criticism and pedagogy" (1990, 40-41). The theoretical work Mailloux talks about can be the work of examining the conventions and norms that regulate processes of interpretation, the work of determining the broader field of possible interpretations by taking into account the diversity of responses, or the work of looking for the qualities that define the informed reader (Ravaux 1979, 712). In all these cases Rosenblatt's work is not only irrelevant but an obstacle, because in order for a scholar to examine different responses to a text and focus on the role of the reader, the distinction between the text and its readers must remain intact. In short, when a scholar wants to analyze formal qualities of the text independently of the readers' affective engagement with it (like in New Criticism), Rosenblatt's epistemological approach cannot be used. When one wants to examine how various (pre-defined) readers respond to a (pre-defined same) text, Rosenblatt's approach is also useless. Rosenblatt's theory seems to provide us, however, with the best suited method of engaging with specific reading events: when a text and the knowledge of the text, as well as the reader of the text, all emerge in a complex transaction which constitutes the literary reading. Her method can answer questions like "what is the specific text/knowledge/reader that emerges in this constellation of transactive factors/agents?"

It becomes clear, as the explanation of Rosenblatt's theory develops, that we are talking of no easy feat: with the abandonment of pre-defined knower and known, there cannot be a general methodology of analysis of reading events/literary texts. No easy answer to the question where the meaning is located so that we can look for it

there: rather, the question must change, for there are not two ends in space-time between which the meaning can be found, but the relations allow for a space-time that *constitutes* the meaning to come about. The answer can only be provisional and restricted to the particular event under observation by the particular observant. My reading of Bechdel, therefore, does not claim to discover meanings that resides in the memoir, but rather to convey the meanings that emerge in my interaction with it.

Something that Rosenblatt's theory does not explicitly address (although it does allow room for it) is the possibility for a reader to be reading more than one literary texts together. What is the relationship between the texts in that case? If I approach my reading of Bechdel as an event during which a specific work of literature emerges, how does the presence of Woolf, and later of Rich, affect the method of reading that needs to be employed? I need to remind my reader that my methodological exploration aims to approach the texts that are read together in this thesis not as texts that come from different times and, therefore, where one of them is the frame of reference or constitutes the environment for the other, but as texts that are created anew during the event of my reading them together. That is, even though Woolf's and Rich's work pre-exists the work of Bechdel, and has informed it by way of influence, I do not want to explore the results of influence on the latter work. This thesis is not me reading a text by Bechdel which bears the traces of Woolf's or Rich's influence (although of course Bechdel's work does bear these traces). And it is not me, informed by the writings of Woolf or Rich and bearing this knowledge as a tool for interpretation, reading Bechdel (although I have read Woolf and Rich before, and they are part of my past experiences that constitute me as a subject, therefore I do bring this knowledge to every event of reading in which I participate). My aim is to describe, and therefore to participate in bringing into existence, an event during which two texts and me come together and new meanings emerge in the process. The question the next section addresses is what happens in the event of reading (at least) two texts at the same time and what reading method is appropriate for it. This is where the metaphor of diffraction, which Haraway employed first, returns.

Diffractive reading as literary reading

The importance of the term diffraction, as used by Haraway, is also elaborated on by Karen Barad in *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (2007). When Barad talks of diffraction she does not only mean diffraction in optics, but also diffraction as a quantum phenomenon. This last one is important because it demonstrates how quantum physics breaks down the paradigm of classical physics: quantum physicists first showed with experiments (in which diffraction played an important role) that particles can sometimes behave like waves, showing in practice the indeterminacy principle, that is, that the ontology of anything cannot be determined without regard to the apparatus of observation, or else that the apparatus participates in the ontology of the thing observed. As Dewey and Bentley have also argued, this has the revolutionary consequence that, from this moment on, the epistemological access to something and the thing itself are considered to be entangled with each other and not separable. Barad argues that diffraction apparatuses "highlight, exhibit, and make evident the entangled structure of the changing and contingent ontology of the world, including the ontology of knowing" (Barad 2007, 73).

What would it mean, though, if we looked at reading texts together as a diffraction? Barad uses diffraction as a figuration for her reading methodology because it is a method "attuned to the entanglement of the apparatuses of production, one that enables genealogical analyses of how boundaries are produced rather than presuming sets of well-worn binaries in advance" (ibid., 30). This very important aspect of diffraction, that it does not presume what the object and what the subject is in advance, makes it suitable for the reading of more than one texts together, particularly when we do not want to use one of them as a frame of reference through which we examine the other. In her work, Barad theorizes the relationship between "the natural" and "the social" without assuming the one as a fixed referent for understanding the other. With diffractive reading, she argues, she is able to attend "to entanglements in reading important insights and approaches through one another" (ibid., 30). In thinking insights from science and social theories through one another, Barad refuses to position schools of thought against each other and instead places them in conversation in a way that attends to the relational ontology that is in the heart of the

revolutionary paradigm quantum physics brought about, as well as in a way that does not prioritize the one over the other (ibid., 92-93).

The diffractive methodology has been taken up by Iris van der Tuin, who argues that diffractive reading enables feminist philosophers to practice what Elizabeth Grosz calls an affirmative engagement with "primary texts" in a way that engages these texts in a process of transformation (Grosz 2005, 2-3). This way one can avoid the dialectical relationship in which critique binds theories together: a relationship which in the end, according to van der Tuin, reaffirms the "primary text's" authority and primary status (van der Tuin 2014, 45).

In my thesis I first read Bechdel's memoir together with Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse* and then with a poem by Adrienne Rich, "The Roofwalker". What makes diffractive reading an appropriate method is my intention to read Bechdel together with the other's work in a way that does not prioritize the one over the other by turning one of into a frame of reference to examine the other through. It is also the productive aspect of diffractive reading, which transforms texts into something they were not when read individually. Diffractive reading may originate in philosophy, but I want to argue that reading diffractively texts that are primarily literary is just as useful to the extent that it produces certain thematic patterns which cannot be observed in them when read otherwise. Since the diffractive reading that I practice brings together Barad's diffractive reading with Rosenblatt's transactive reading, it can accommodate the particular character of literary reading, where thematic patterns emerge through stylistic choices, and textual cues lead the reader into the aesthetic stance, that is, a focus on the subjective, affective element of meaning-making.

Still, adapting a method from philosophy into literary studies requires some justification. Especially since, although the diffractive reading is a new method in philosophy, there may be methods to a certain extent similar to it in the drawers of the study of literature under a different name, such as intertextual reading and comparative reading. Reading texts together, looking for thematic patterns they share is usually called a comparative method. Reading a text with the text's intertextual references is called intertextual reading. Reading Bechdel together with her literary references is a form of intertextual reading and an intertextual reading can make a productive and transformative use of the intertext, which is what I intend to do with

the texts I am reading. I therefore need to examine whether diffractive reading can be considered a form of comparative or intertextual reading or not, and explain why I choose to use the term diffractive reading to describe my method.

Reading texts not as self-contained systems but as belonging in stratums of connectivity can be called an intertextual reading. Intertextuality is a very broad and vague term and has diverse definitions, which range from the somewhat more traditional idea of a relation of influence between texts to the idea that one can read the whole social field in one text, as well as from an opening up of interpretive possibilities to a narrowing down of them (Martínez Alfaro 1996). There are roughly two general trends in intertextual reading as far as the interpretation of texts is concerned.[5] The first approach is that of the poststructuralists, which proceeds from Julia Kristeva's definition of intertextuality. For Kristeva, any analysis of text must investigate the status of each word as belonging to a three dimensional textual space the coordinates of which are writing subject, addressee and exterior texts. Anterior and synchronous literary and cultural texts constitute the horizontal axis of the textual space, which is a mosaic of quotations. The ontological presuppositions behind this method of analysis is that no text is closed, every text derives meaning through other texts, and texts can be anything that has acquired meaning through culture and in the social (Kristeva 1986, 37). Barthes is a typical representative of the first trend: he focuses not only on the productivity of reading texts together with their quotations, but even more so on reading them with their anonymous absorption of social "text". For Barthes, texts only derive meaning through their relations to other texts, these other texts being, in effect, generated, like the any text, not by the subjectivity of an author but by the langue and culture at large (Barthes 1977, 146). His approach opens up the text so radically that the interpretations can be as many as the text's intertext: infinite. This results in the liberation of the reader from any hermeneutive constraint, as she is able to trace relations between texts without deference to the authority of the writer (Irwin 2004, 230) but it thus forgoes the possibility of effectively analyzing texts (Clayton and Rothstein 1991, 23). This relativist tendency has been criticized by literary scholar William Irwin, who rightfully argues that behind the refusal of a transcendental signified and the assumption that textual meaning is produced through

[5] I use the word interpretation because of respect to the tradition of these trends, but in my approach any reading of texts is a meaning-making practice, which departs from hermeneutic ideas and focuses on the productivity of reading.

reference to texts and only texts, lies "the anti-logocentric assertion that language can never capture reality" (Irwin 2004, 235). Although I do not agree with the majority of Irwin's critique of intertextuality (for example, his belief that the text is fixed and unchanged regardless of the reader's interpretation or its interaction with other texts could not be more different from my approach), I find his point on the relativism of the poststructuralists' approach very insightful, as it points out what feminist philosopher Claire Colebrook has identified as the most problematic aspect of poststructuralism, namely its humanist foundation. Colebrook argues that poststructuralism's move away from realism to relativism did not mean a similar move away from a representationalist humanistic paradigm of thought, as it still owes, in its refusal of a transcendental signified, its existence on equivocity, which "accepts two levels*/signifier and signified, sign and world, representation and the real*/without asking the genesis of this difference" (Colebrook 2004, 291). This espousal of an equivocal ontology is what makes Rosenblatt, in her 1993 article, disagree with the poststructuralist approach that grants absolute freedom to the reader: her approach to reading as a transactive event and my Barad's diffractive reading are based on an ontology widely different, as I explained earlier.

The second major trend on intertextuality, the most representative of which are Jonathan Culler, Gérard Genette and Michel Riffaterre, attempts to put limitations to the infinitely expanding intertext of the poststructuralists, in order to establish some criteria that may enable the development of a method for the practical analysis of intertextuality in literature (Martínez Alfaro 1996, 277). The kind of intertextuality I find in the relation between Bechdel's text with Woolf's and Rich's texts is the one Genette offers in his *Palimpsestes* (1989): the presence of one text in another which takes the form of plagiarism, quotation or allusion (Martínez Alfaro 1996, 280), since the texts I am reading together with Bechdel are in fact chosen from among the texts Bechdel herself chooses to include in her memoir. They are part not only of the text's pre-text but they belong to the list of the text's conscious allusions. Bechdel's hybrid language of comics means that her way of alluding to texts can be through image, text or both. Bechdel talks about Woolf's novel, but she also draws its cover on her desk, to show that she has been reading it. She does the same with Rich's poetry: she writes about it and she draws her lover reading it, although the specific poem that I read together with parts of the memoir is not specifically referred to in it. Woolf's novel is

moreover quoted in the memoir, in the particular way Bechdel has of quoting texts: she copies by hand excerpts of texts as they appear in the original book and includes them not in the speech bubbles or in the captions, but in the main frame as images. Nevertheless, having decided to consider the graphic medium as a kind of literature, even if marginal (Chute 2008), also means that I need to consider these textual relationships as literary allusions and quotations.

Even though my choice of texts is limited, and therefore closer to Genette's idea of intertext than the broad intertext of the poststructuralists, this approach to intertextual reading, is not similar to my use of diffractive reading, because of its viewpoint on the relationship between the texts. The idea that the meaning of the text is limited by the meaning of the texts it refers to is closer to the traditional idea of reading a text together with its literary allusions/references; in this sense, it is closer to the studies of genealogies or literary influence of Bloom's type, mentioned in the introduction, rather than that of van der Tuin, whose cartographic approach to genealogies can be the means of reinvigorating feminist futures of the past by enabling the actualizations of virtual pasts in the Bergsonian sense, where past is not actual, that is, fixed, even though it is real, that is, specific (Van der Tuin 2014, 55). Following van der Tuin, my approach does not address these texts as what they were before the encounter of my reading of them, but what they become during the latter. From this follows an avoidance of categorizing the texts on the basis of linear temporality –since I do not focus on how the reading of the other text has influenced Bechdel in her writing, it does not matter very much to my analysis which text was written before the other. I also want to avoid hierarchizing them by considering one of the texts as the main object of analysis and the other as its context or frame of reference, or by assuming that influence follows a singular route from the oldest to the newest text. I, therefore, refrain from using the term intertextual reading in my description of method.

In the literary analysis chapters that follow, I argue that the texts I am reading together in couples contain a substratum of philosophical and political questions, but I am not suggesting that the texts have some things in common which my reading will simply find and point out, as is usually the case with comparative methods. Instead reading texts diffractively means that patterns of similarities and differences are produced during the reading, without having necessarily been there in advance. Whether diffractive reading can be considered another comparative method or not is contested

ground, and I will not attempt to make a decision, as it depends on the definition of comparison. If one considers the comparative methods to be contingent upon a representationalist paradigm, then diffractive reading is an entirely different method, as it belongs to a radically distinct frame of thought. Comparative Literature scholar David Ferris argues that comparison, the way it is practiced now, intends to affirm the world, in the sense that it is based on the presumption that art reflects the world like a mirror: it is a form of knowledge based on likeness, which means it assumes it as an indisputable fact that the work of art refers to something or someone that exists in the world. Comparison, then, privileges what is known as the world over the recognition of the conditions of knowing the world (Ferris 2011, 36-38). In Ferris' own words, "the task of comparison is a task that originates in relation to the world. It is not a task that belongs to the world" (ibid., 35). This idea of comparison, in Ferris' view, is the characteristic method of the humanities in general insofar as the significance of the humanities has historically resided in the reflection of what it means to be human, i.e. what the humanities study (art, literature, culture, history, etc.) are questions or answers to the enigma of what the human being really is (ibid., 33). In that light, diffractive reading cannot be a form of comparative reading, because it follows a different idea of how the humanities relate to the world. Diffractive reading –like any kind of knowledge practice, whether it takes place within the hard sciences, or in the humanities– is of the world, because it does not simply refer to the world but is a material engagement that participates in the re-making of the world (Barad 2007, 91). When texts are read diffractively, the knowledge produced is not about them, but is part of the texts' re-making.

On the other hand, if comparative reading is taken to mean, more generally, any kind of reading texts together, this can include diffractive reading. Another comparativist, Birgit Kaiser seems to be of this opinion when she calls for a reinvigoration of the comparative method, that is, a re-configuring of what it means to read comparatively, via the diffractive approach (Kaiser 2014, 277). For Kaiser, diffractive reading can enable literary scholars to realize the full impact of the notion of the productivity of reading, which common practices of comparative reading have ignored, since they follow the reflective mode which detaches the reading practice from its object: looking for similarities in works, relations between works and patterns of travelling texts as if the similarities, relations and patterns were there to be found, existing

independently of the reading; as if the latter was a reflection on the texts from a distance, a reflection that does not affect them(ibid., 284).

Whether it is a kind of comparative reading or not, diffractive reading requires that we re-envision the way texts meet each other "no longer as objects of national (or regional) descent, pre-existing their encounters in a comparison, but as 'relata' whose qualities and effects are specified by way of relating while specifying the 'apparatus' (the texts, the reading and the reader) at the same time" (Kaiser, 276-277). This is most suitable for the purposes of this thesis, since its object is to explore how Bechdel's *Are You My Mother?* and Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* approach the relationship between subject and reality, and how Bechdel's *Are You My Mother?* and Rich's "The Roofwalker" approach the question of the politics of writing when read together in a way that allows for certain patterns to emerge with/in the texts' encounter, that is, when read together diffractively, by me (whatever "me" means in the process of this reading: for this too emerges in the event of the reading-together – but more on that later). In order to do so I will begin with explaining how Bechdel's text approaches these subjects alone, and then move on to see how its approach changes if read together with Woolf's or Rich's text. Since this seems hardly to be faithful to the idea that Bechdel and Woolf's texts, as well as Bechdel's and Rich's texts, do not pre-exist their encounter, I need to make a distinction between the text-as-symbols-on-a-page and text-as-what-emerges-in-the-event-of-reading, what literary theorist Derek Attridge describes as the distinction between the uniqueness and the singularity of a literary text. The unique arrangement of words and images of both books makes them, in a sense, the same always: which means that these words (and images) in this order will always constitute these texts. But the singularity of the texts is something different: it does not lie in any unchangeable essence but rather "arises from the work's constitution as a set of active relations, put in play in the reading, that never settle into a fixed configuration" (Attridge 2004, 68). Attridge's description of the literary work as singular in the sense that every reading of it is a different event shows the influence of Rosenblatt's description of reading as an event. As I have already explained, Rosenblatt's transactive theory of reading describes the work of literature as the transaction between the text and the reader. For her the literary work is located neither in the written words on the page nor in the reader's mind, but emerges at the moment of their transaction –the event during which reader and text

co-emerge (Rosenblatt 1995, 27). The consequence of Rosenblatt's and Attridge's approach is that the literary work is variable and multiple even if the printed words and images are unique and unchangeable. Reading Bechdel "alone" then is a poor way of saying that I will explore first what is produced during the event of my meeting with Bechdel before I move on to observe (or, more correctly, be part of enabling) the results of all three of us (whether it is Bechdel, Woolf and me or Bechdel, Rich and me) meeting together. Both in the "individual" reading of Bechdel and the diffractive reading with Woolf and Rich, I use a combination of close reading of brief passages or panels with a more general reading in the search of thematic patterns that emerge in the each of the works as a whole and their combination. For the close and general reading of the graphic text in particular, the tools I use come from the semiological box offered by comics expert Scott McCloud, in his *Making Comics: Storytelling Secrets of Comics, Manga an Graphic Novels*.

The reader

As mentioned earlier, Kaiser has argued that a diffractive reading enables us to look at texts as "'relata' whose qualities and effects are specified by way of relating while specifying the 'apparatus' (the texts, the reading and the reader)" (Kaiser 2014, 276). Even if we suppose that I have specified the texts and the reading sufficiently, I have yet to account for myself as part of this reading-together "apparatus". This I have not seen done in philosophical uses of diffractive reading, but only hinted at. And is understandable, considering how difficult it is. For example, Barad talks about the genealogy of diffractive reading: it belongs with both the tradition of feminist theory and contemporary physics. To account for the specificity of knowledge, the position of the knower is, for both traditions, paramount not only to enabling the determination of the kind of knowledge produced but also to defining the nature of the phenomenon observed, for the observer is part of the phenomenon. However, Barad shows why a typical "positioning" of an "I" is not fit for a diffraction experiment:

> [I]t's important that any 'I' that might have seemed to give a sense of narration be interrupted, since this positioning is counter to diffracting. There

> is no 'I' that exists outside of the diffraction pattern, observing it, telling its story. In an important sense, this story in its ongoing (re)patterning is (re)(con)figuring me. 'I' am neither outside nor inside; 'I' am of the diffraction pattern. Or rather, this 'I' that is not 'me' alone and never was, that is always already multiply dispersed and diffracted throughout spacetime(mattering), including in this paper, in its ongoing being-becoming is of the diffraction pattern. (Barad 2014, 181-182)

Clearly, if it was not me doing the reading, the patterns that emerge in the reading-together of Bechdel and Woolf, as well as in the reading of Bechdel and Rich, would not have been the same. However, with the danger of reproducing the divide between the humanities and the sciences, I am obliged to admit that to account for a person that is part of a diffractive reading practice is much harder than taking into account a simple device like the one-slit and the two-slit apparatuses that showed the indeterminacy of the nature of matter, for the following reason: when the reader is not the disembodied rational subject of Cartesian metaphysics, she is also not the subject of psychoanalysis, governed by drives controlled by a socially contracted ego, and therefore cannot be abstracted. She is an embodied, embedded subject, who drags along a whole indeterminate and limitless web of connections impossible to fully account for. And the more so, when –to be faithful not only to Barad but also to Rosenblatt's notion of the literary text as the event of the encounter of reader and texts, when both reader and texts do not pre-exist as such but emerge during the event– this person during and after the reading is not the same person that she was before. Being thus concerned with remaining "faithful" to my theoretical framework makes me particularly aware of the danger of beginning a kind of reader-talk which explains how the psychological profile or the basic schema of the reader brings about the specific form that a text takes in interaction with her. This, as explained earlier, assumes a stability in the reader which does not fit with the notion of the event of reading that this thesis supports.

Nevertheless, if I should venture to mention the parts of "me" and my position that have played an important role in enabling these specific patterns to come about during the reading, those would be philosophical questions around onto-epistemology and the nature of politics that were the focus of my studies in the Gender Studies Programme at Utrecht University. In the following chapters, the preoccupation with these

questions will become apparent. However I do not want to support the idea that it is simply me that brought this focus to the works I am reading. In Bechdel, Rich and Woolf's work I found the questions that concerned me just as much as I brought them with me, and I would be lying if I claimed that I am certain that the questions would exist, or have the form they have now, if it were not for the reading of these works of art.

“Subject and Object and the Nature of reality” plexiglass domes and jars on nerves (Bechdel and Woolf’s onto-epistemological questions)

Introduction

Bechdel’s memoir and Woolf’s novel are more than literature and graphic autobiography. They are texts that do philosophy –in the sense that they deal with issues such as the nature of reality and the nature of knowledge– in unusual forms (literary and graphic). For example, it has been observed that *Are You My Mother?* should be read more as a graphic essay than as a memoir (Bradley 2013, 163) and that Woolf’s fiction is “fictionalized epistemology” (Hintikka 1979, 6). The borderlines between the literary and the philosophical are pervious and shifting, and it would be a mistake to argue that there are literary works which are not philosophical at all, or philosophical works which are not literary in the least. It is, however, important to stress the philosophical qualities of the two works I am reading together in this chapter: in this chapter the two books are read together as philosophical treatises with a common theme: subject and object and the nature of reality. Their literariness and graphic imagery is not ignored but treated as another way of doing philosophy, for these philosophical texts do philosophy differently *by way of* literariness and graphic imagery.

As stated in the methodology chapter, Rosenblatt’s transactive theory of reading distinguishes between two stances of reading: the efferent and the aesthetic stance. These two stances mean two different objects on which the reader focuses their attention. Efferent reading is reading for information that can be extracted from a text and aesthetic reading is reading with a focus on the feelings, sensations and the general experience that happen to the reader during the reading. Although these two stances are more a spectrum than a binary, and they most of the times coexist in

different amounts, it is the presence of the latter that gives the work of literature its literary quality. The work of literature is precisely the event that takes place when the readers immerse themselves in an aesthetic contemplation whose object is what the perceivers make of their responses to the stimulus that a text provides, a contemplation of "what the words could make them see and hear and feel and think" (Rosenblatt 1978, 40). Bechdel and Woolf do philosophy by way of graphic imagery and literariness because my reading of them (prompted by textual clues) follows the aesthetic stance: it is not an abstract contemplation of these philosophical questions that the works I am reading invite me to make, but a contemplation of them that takes the form of literary experience.

The title of the chapter is meant to be a joke. In *To the Lighthouse* Lily Briscoe asks Andrew Ramsay what his father's philosophical books are about. His answer "Subject and object and the nature of reality", pretentious and vague, marks a certain image of philosophy and the philosopher, which Lily (and most likely Woolf herself) finds at the same time admirable and ridiculous. She wants to know what this can mean and Andrew trying to help says "Think of a kitchen table, then, when you're not there". Lily thinks of this kitchen table every time she thinks of Mr. Ramsay's work, even at this moment when she walks into an orchard with a friend and "sees' the table lodged in a pear tree. Her respect for Mr. Ramsay's elevated existence is tempered with pity (and a touch of sarcasm) when she thinks:

> Naturally, if one's days were passed in this seeing of angular essences, this reducing of lovely evenings, with all their flamingo clouds and blue and silver to a white deal four-legged table (and it was a mark of the finest minds so to do), naturally one could not be judged like an ordinary person. (Woolf 2000, 28)

The joke is on a disembodied traditional Western philosophy which needs to separate itself from the ordinary experience of a lovely evening in order to contemplate the nature of knowing and the nature of reality. On a philosophy, moreover, which is built on a humanistic presumption (Westling 1999, 858). The joke is also on a philosopher who bullies his children and sucks the life out of his wife with his temper and neediness, and who is weak and stoops low to get people's praise because he needs it to feed his feeble ego. It is a joke on Woolf's father, as Mr. Ramsay is a satiric portrait of Sir Leslie Stephen (ibid., 860).

But funny as this title sounds, it is what *To the Lighthouse* concerns itself with, as Bechdel observes (2012, 255). It is also what Bechdel's book is about, and what this chapter is about as well: subject and object and the nature of reality. But let us stay with the humour of it a bit longer, because it may help us, like it helped Woolf and Bechdel, to approach this topic, if not with less ambition, at least with a sense of the ridiculousness that accompanies these vast ambitious projects. The use of exaggeration and parody can be a means of exposing the limitations of systems of thoughts,[6] and this is the first step towards imagining alternative systems. A parody of a certain philosophical jargon and attitude is a good company to keep when you set out to do philosophy differently.

In order to show how a diffractive reading of Bechdel and Woolf's works enables a graphic-literary-philosophical reflection on the nature of reality and the question of knowledge, I will start with a reading of Bechdel's approach towards these subjects and then move on to see how its approach changes when read together with Woolf.

Plexiglass domes

Bechdel describes her relationship to the world of things, people and texts:

> Here, in fact, is a picture of me in my office.
>
> Alone.
>
> Physically cut off from the outside world.
>
> But taking detailed mental note of it. (Bechdel 2012, 133)

[6] The subversive dimension of humor both as political strategy and as a means of discursive emancipation is a common philosophical notion. Laughter is believed to test the limits of representation, and through its slippages, semiotic gaps and generally its ability to draw on forms of structural weakness it undermines hierarchies and oppressive institutions (Gantar 2005, 92). Woolf in *The Three Guineas* expresses the belief that laughter is "an antidote to dominance" (Three Guineas, note 32, chapter 3) which can explain her using it when defying her paternal philosophical authority. Judith Butler also finds in laughter a certain power of resistance to and critique of powerful institutions when she talks about the effects of parodic practices on the gender system (Butler 1999, 176). But laughter has also a creative, and not only a critical, aspect: Rosi Braidotti, discussing the political and philosophical potential of sexual difference, compares the project of sexual difference with subversive laughter because of its ability to bring into existence alternative systems of thought as well as subjectivities (Braidotti 2001, 107).

An old drawing she made as a child of an office that is a "perfect environment", an "enclosed impregnable space" with a "keep-out" sigh, is now analysed by her and is found to have a Seussian influence. In *Dr. Seuss's Sleep Book*, a book for children Bechdel had read when she was a child, she finds the image of a "plexiglass dome". It looks like an impregnated uterus, but Bechdel sees it as a metaphor for the mind, her mind. In it, a creature cut-off from the world performs measurements on things that come in the dome from the outside world through a complex apparatus, things that have the form of small spherical particles. The plexiglass dome allows for information from the outside world to come in, but like a wall it keeps the mind separate from the world (Bechdel 2012, 132-133) (see figure 1). Bechdel has learned how to keep the world at bay by her mother, who would "go off duty at night" (ibid., 129): she would sit in the living room reading and refusing to be bothered by her daughter. Like her mother, young Bechdel would create separate spaces in the common rooms of their house, which she calls her "offices" (ibid., 131) where she would feel "inviolable" (ibid., 130) and where she would work on her drawings.

But it is not only in her offices that Bechdel was cutting herself off from the world. She remembers being an extremely self-conscious child in all aspects of her life, in the sense that she feels she was always observing herself from afar. There is a distance that she maintained from her experience, and, in spite of the many years of therapy, still does. What may have appeared like the spontaneous behaviour of a child enjoying being outside was in fact an elaborately constructed fantasy of a person who was prevented by something from plunging into the experience (ibid., 143) (see figure 2). On page 134, Bechdel creates an interdepended combination of image and texts, where image and text contribute different information towards meaning-making: a realistic frame is contrasted with a caption that alters the meaning of the image. The eye moves from a frame that creates in the reader a feeling of being there in the moment, of witnessing little Alison flinging herself on the lawn (and therefore the image depicts something that feels very real) to a caption that suggests that the image is not what it looks like. Instead of simply being there, Bechdel observes herself being there, and builds a narrative around the observation, like when she is experiencing a revelatory moment during therapy, and she interrupts the session to make notes (ibid.,

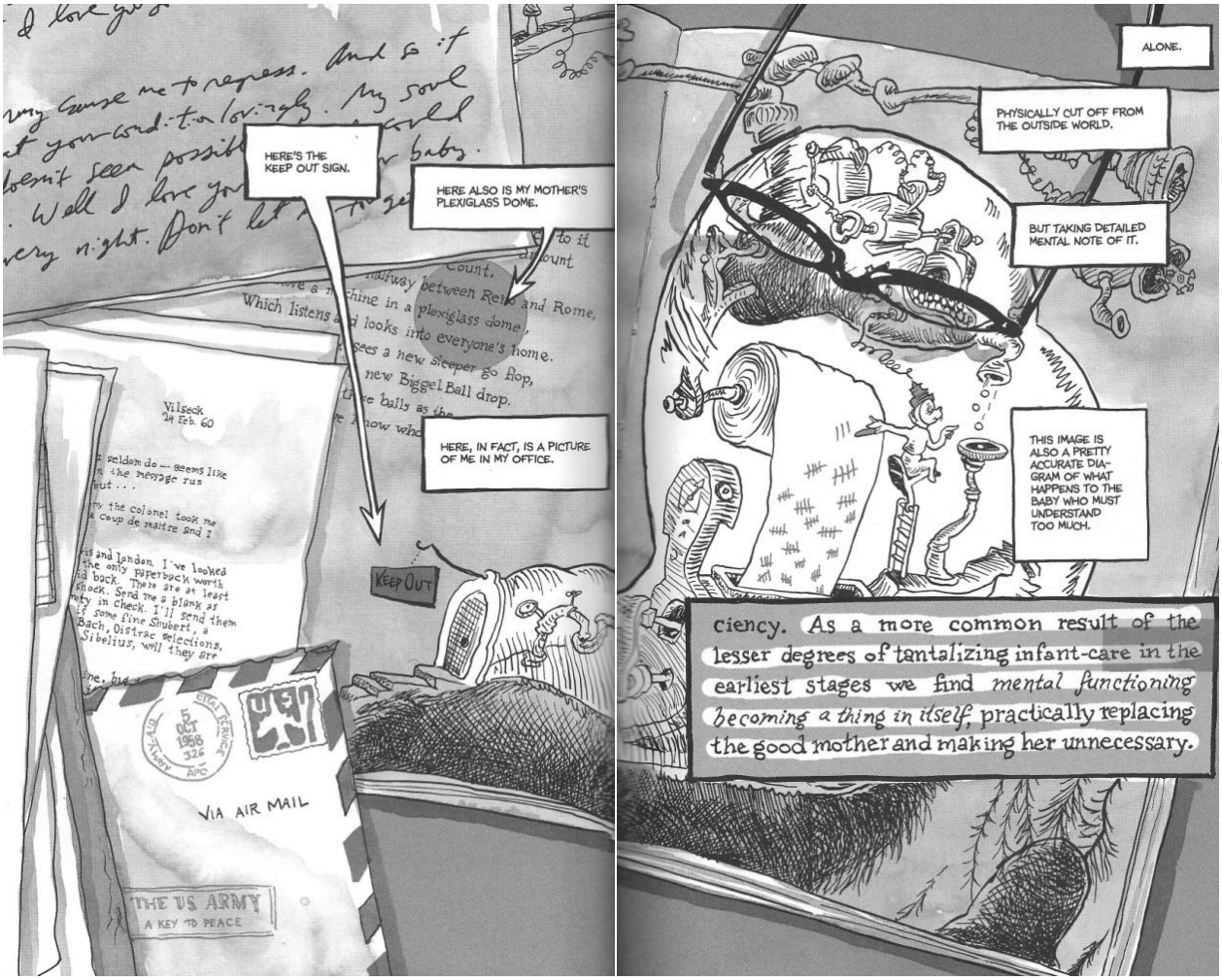

Figure 1. Drawing of a drawing from *Dr. Seuss' Sleepbook*, used by Bechdel to describe her mind as cut off from the world, from Alison Bechdel's *Are You My Mother?*, 132-133 (Copyright © 2012 by Alison Bechdel.)

152) (see figure 3). The interruption is marked graphically by an abrupt change in the choice of frame: the close-up turns into a frame that invites the reader to look at the scene from above, visualizing the being cut off from the world that her therapist talks about.

There is a paradox at the heart of Bechdel's memoir. She writes it with the hope that it can bridge the gap between her mind and the actual world of experience –and in optimistic moments she argues that her diary-writing has saved her in that way (ibid., 151)– but she fears that instead it turns out to be, like her childhood diary, just another "projection of a mental apparatus" (ibid.), suspect by definition because her mind is cut off from the world and because it is not an expression of herself as she truly is. "I

was plagued then, as now, with a tendency to edit my thoughts before they even took shape" (ibid., 49) (see figure 4), she says, and that means that her autobiographical writing must show, at best, an edited version of who she is. She explains why for her the edited version is not her true self using the psychoanalytic theory of Donald Winnicott, an important mid-twentieth century child psychoanalyst who plays a central role in the memoir both as a character and as a theoretical reference. Winnicott distinguishes between the "true self" and the "false self" in "Mind and Its Relation to the Psyche-Soma" (1954). He explains that, in conditions of a healthy, happy upbringing, the psyche is not localized anywhere in particular, but in the whole of the

Figure 2. Bechdel depicting herself as a child constructing fantasies which prevent her from spontaneously living her experience, and as a child-artist working in "one of her offices", from Alison Bechdel's *Are You My Mother?*, 142 (Copyright © 2012 by Alison Bechdel.)

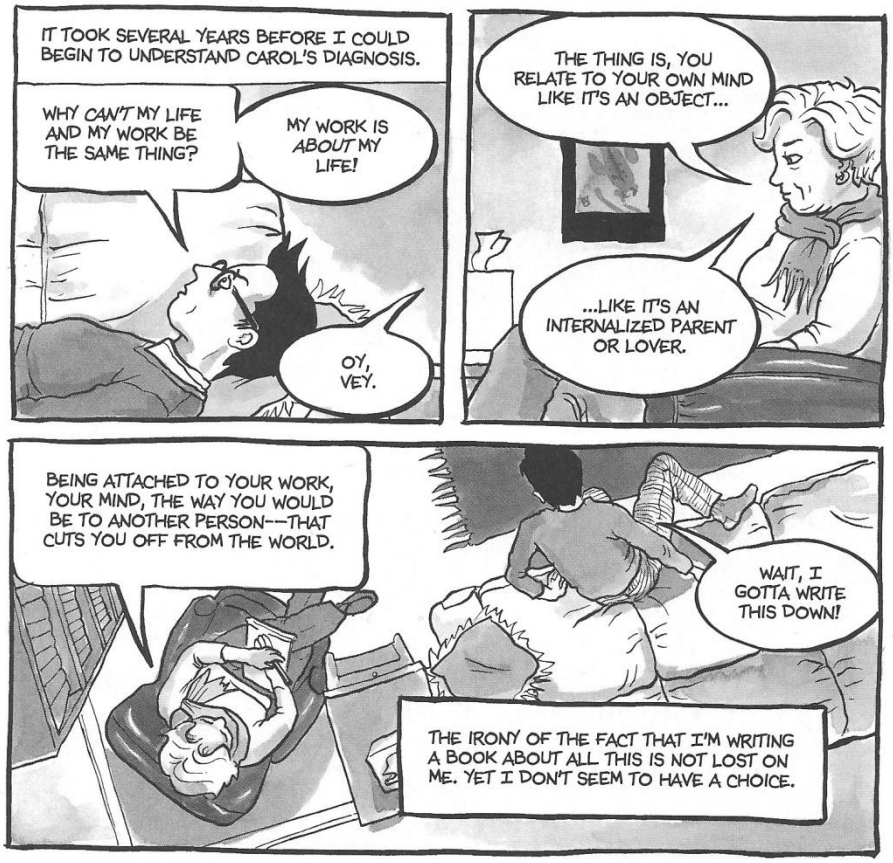

Figure 3. Bechdel in her therapist's office, interrupts the session to make notes. The interruption is accompanied by a change in the choice of frame: the close-up turns into a look-from-above frame, stressing her distance from the world of experience. From Alison Bechdel's *Are You My Mother?*, 152 (Copyright © 2012 by Alison Bechdel.)

body. Psyche for Winnicott means "the imaginative elaboration of somatic parts, feelings, and functions, that is, of *physical aliveness*" (1954, 202, original emphasis). In the same conditions, the mind as mental function develops in order for the infant to turn a good-enough environment into a perfect one. However, an erratic or in some way faulty care-taking in the earliest stages can result in "mental *functioning becoming a thing in itself,* practically replacing the good mother and making her unnecessary" (ibid., 203, original emphasis). The consequence of this is that the infant's psyche gets "seduced" into the mind (becomes a pathological psyche-mind) and loses the intimate relationship it had with the soma (body). What follows: 1. there is no partnership between the mind-psyche and the body, but the mind-psyche resides either in the head or somewhere around it, and 2. the individual finds it hard to identify with the dependent part of themselves: in fact, psychoanalyst Alice Miller

(another reference of Bechdel's) argues, they are in denial of it and they despise it (1990, 104). A false self develops, which comes with a feeling of mental superiority that gives them the satisfaction of knowing more than other people but, at the same time, cuts them off from everything and everyone around them. Miller gives the example of a patient who had a recurrent dream of being isolated in a tower which offered a great view but condemned him to a life of loneliness. After a successful regression he had another dream in which the tower was a city and he was not alone anymore, happy to not have a complete view and to not be cleverer than other people (ibid., 105). Winnicott would describe this as the desired state of being "without

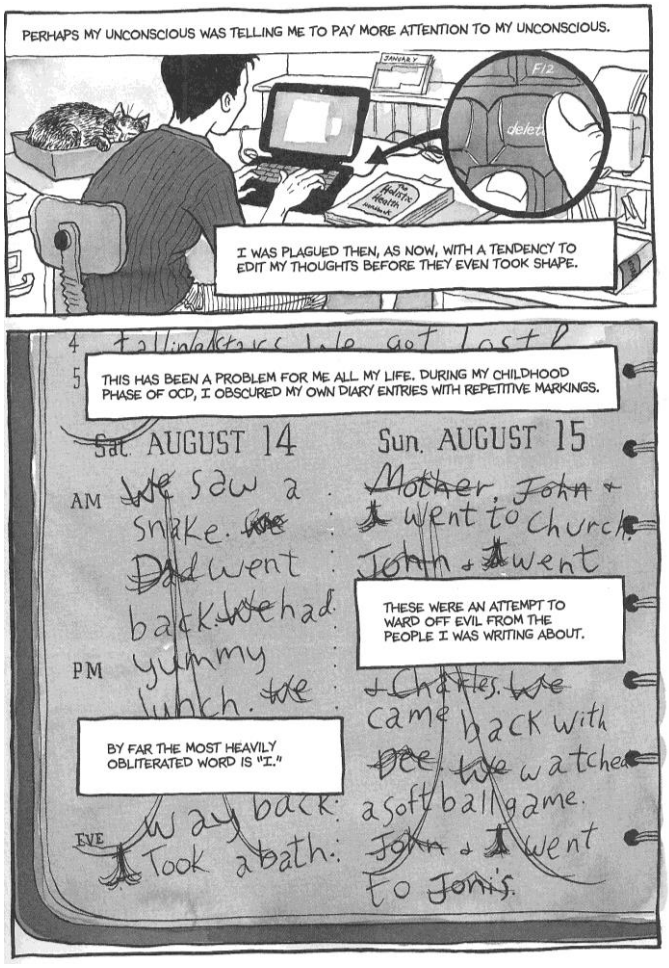

Figure 4. Bechdel in mature age is pressing the delete key. Underneath that, an entry of her childhood diary with parts obscured with "a curvy circumflex": editing her thoughts then as well as now. From Alison Bechdel's *Are You My Mother?*, 49 (Copyright © 2012 by Alison Bechdel.)

mind" (1954, 204), meaning the state of letting go of the false self, for if the false self is associated with an overgrown mental function, the true self is associated with "acceptance of not knowing" (ibid., 206), which means acceptance of dependence and trust in the caring environment.

The false self is a big part of how Bechdel explains her distance from her experience (2012, 115, 150, 151). Already in *Fun Home*, her previous memoir about the complicated relationship she had with her father –images from which I include to support my argument– she explains how her "compulsive propensity to autobiography" (Bechel 2007, 140) can be traced back to the time she started her diary-writing in the midst of a severe obsessive-compulsive spell, at the age of ten. In *Are You My Mother?* Bechdel tells us that her mother helped her with her diary entries because this obsessive-compulsive disorder was making it harder and harder for her to write (2012, 68-69). In *Fun Home* one can learn more about the greater "epistemological crisis" (Bechdel 2007, 141) (see figure 5) that prompted her mother's interference, which her therapist would later find suspect of complicity with the false self (Bechdel 2012, 151). Soon after she starts her diary, the epistemological crisis sets in and makes her wonder whether she can know for sure that the things she writes about, things that happen in her life, like finishing a book or eating pop-corn, are "absolutely, objectively true", and not simply her own perceptions (which for Bechdel seem to be something entirely different from the objectively existent things-in-themselves). Small *I think*s are inserted next to every sentence like "gossamer sutures in that gaping rift between signifier and signified" (Bechdel 2007, 142) (see figure 6) to qualify even the simplest declarative sentences. A curvy circumflex shorthand version of *I think* is soon created by her to save time, and it eventually takes over the diary as it is drawn after sentences, over names and pronouns (to protect her subjects from the evil that her hubris of assuming their realness might inflict upon them), and finally over entire entries.

The doubt whether what Bechdel sees is what is in fact there finds itself in her style of drawing. Bechdel's drawing style is realistic, and it becomes photographically realistic when she presents the reader with archival material, like letters, newspaper clips and excerpts from books. But the realistic drawing style is not meant to create a documentary-like perspective, but as Chute says, Bechdel belongs with the tradition of cartoonists who use realistic style to question realism, to question representation

(2010, 6). Going back to figure one, for example, which captures the image of Dr. Seuss' book, we see that it is truly, in a sense, a picture of Bechdel in her office. The two-page panel is an image of her desk seen form her perspective as she stands over it, with the open book, her glasses, and her father's letters to her mother. Bechdel herself is not there, but the reader becomes Bechdel, not only because we see through her perspective, but also because when a panel expands to the edges of the page, it "bleeds" into our world, drawing us in (McCloud 2006, 163). The image could be read as realist in the sense that, since with it Bechdel is telling us that we see what she sees, then this is what is there. Following Chute, however, I read this as a technique for showing to us that there's no perspective from which to observe things than *as* her:

Figure 5. Small (highlighted) "I thinks" written after every declarative sentence in 10-year-old Bechdel's diary. An epistemological crisis. From Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, 141 (Copyright © 2007 by Alison Bechdel.)

Figure 6. The "I thinks" turn into a curvy circumflex meant to ward off evil from the people mentioned in the diary. From Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, 142-143 (Copyright © 2007 by Alison Bechdel.)

it is only her perspective that we see. Moreover, the fact that the main "archival material" in the panel is a children's book that yields information about the writer's internal life makes the panel a mock of what usually documentary-like realistic depictions of archival material for supporting autobiography are. Not proof of facts but doubt for perspective.

This chronic doubt, the preoccupation with the nature of knowing, the question of what her knowledge relationship to the world really is, is not only marked in the style of her work. It is also prevalent in her life (which is the content of her work) and it seems to give her acute pain, both because it makes her feel disconnected from anything outside her mind, and because it makes writing difficult for her. The disconnection from the world and her body is, for Bechdel, the cause of numerous

psychic "ailments", like a fear of throwing up, which shows both a fear of physical weakness-illness (2012, 259-260) and a resentment of being female (ibid., 279), an extreme guilt for her younger self's sexual fantasies (ibid., 145), a paralyzing self-consciousness (ibid., 156) and an obsessive need to record and archive everything to the last detail, including her conversations with her mother or information about her internal life (ibid., 11 and 17). The difficulty it produces for her in her work is an overarching editorial voice which forces her to delete two sentences for every one she puts down (ibid., 18), as well as to spend a lot of time on a meticulously planned drawing and writing style (ibid., 251): in one of her therapy sessions, Bechdel realizes that her style has been developed in order to protect her "pure", spontaneous drawing which represents a more original part of herself (ibid., 252).

She seems to be looking for a way to stop being immersed in this question, so that she can become her "true self" who does not need to know and is therefore allowed to simply be (to be in her body, to be in the world). This is where she mentions one of Winnicott's patients who had developed a very strong "false self" and who, at the climax of her sessions with Winnicott, felt something that she described as "not-knowing" and that produced in her "tremendous relief" (ibid., 151). Bechdel hopes that a similar breakthrough may enable her to be less self-conscious about her work as well, that it may make it easier for her to write faster, freed from the dictatorship of the editorial voice: a stronger "true self", therefore, will enable not only an easier relationship with the world but also with the creative process. To demonstrate her belief that her overgrown mind impedes her creativity she describes a dream that she had of a spiderweb so perfect, "that could not be replicated with the 'tools or measuring devices' of the conscious mind" which she interprets as "a fantasy of what my own creativity might look like if I weren't constantly impeding its flow" (ibid., 65-66).

Since Bechdel wants to be her own analyst and cure herself (ibid., 149), she comes up with her own diagnosis and decides her own treatment. The epistemological distance of her mind from the world is explained by Bechdel (in the light of Winnicott's theory) as the result of her relationship with her mother when an infant. As already explained, a preoccupied mother, who is less able to cater to the baby's needs, may be the reason the baby has to rely too much on this capacity, and develop a mind that replaces the mother. Bechdel's therapist seems to agree with this theory when she

observes that Bechdel relates to her mind and her work like an internalized parent. This is shown with a series of panels where the close-ups turn into a looking-from-above frame: the irony of writing a book about this, which Bechdel is talking about, is shown with the image: the distancing shows that her relation with life, like a revelatory moment in therapy, is a relation of distance (ibid., 152) (see figure 3). This is the beginning of an over-energetic mind which is separated from the body. The separation between Bechdel's mind from the world is found by Winnicott and Bechdel jointly, not surprisingly, to be brought about by "a denial of dependence, a fantasy of self sufficiency" (ibid., 134).

What is surprising is Bechdel's self-prescribed treatment: it's no less than an opening up towards other texts. Take for example *Dr. Seuss' Sleep Book*. On p. 134 we see an entranced little Alison reading Dr. Seuss' book in her bed. The book reads: "This

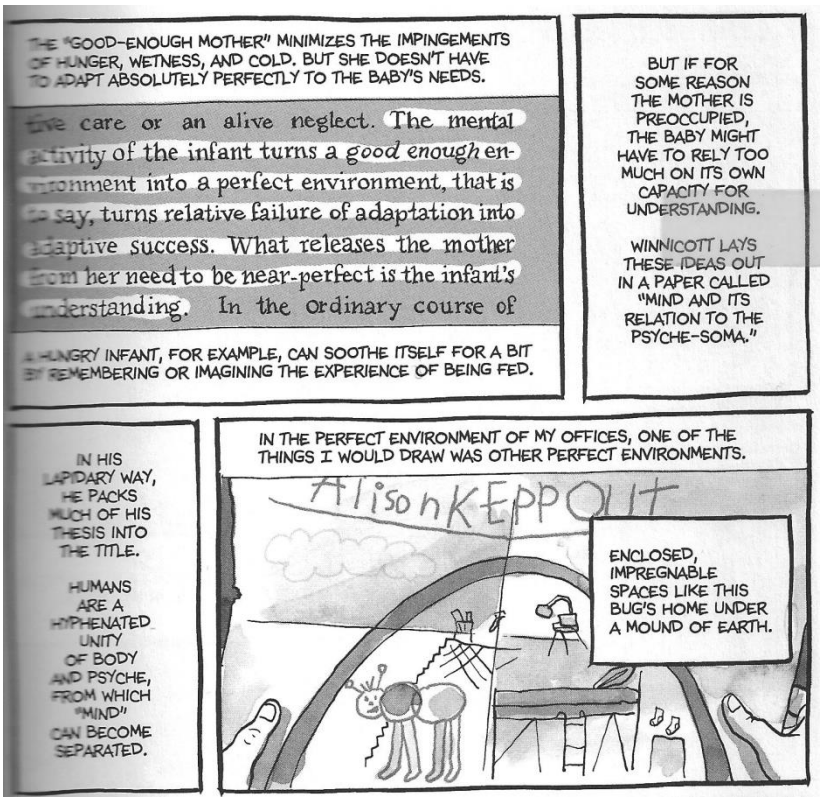

Figure 7. Bechdel reads and explains Winnicott, then shows how the separation of her mind from her body is expressed in one of her children's drawings, which shows the marked influence of Dr. Seus's plexiglass dome. From Alison Bechdel's *Are You My Mother?*, 131 (Copyright © 2012 by Alison Bechdel.)

book is to be read in bed", and Bechdel explains that what fascinated her with the book as a child was the way it manages with a clever conceit to include the reader in the list of its characters: they belong to the number of creatures going to sleep. We see here that depending on her mind also includes relating to texts in a way that helps the child not to depend on her mother. She uses the book to help herself sleep without her mother's help. The book replaces the mother (and let us not forget that it is a separated mother, and one suspects a not-good-enough mother, who needs to be replaced by a book). In this light, her relationship to books can be seen more as another symptom of her "complaint" than as a solution to it: the book supports her overgrown mental function that helps the false self grow.

However, there is a twist here: the separability of the mind from the world is contrasted to the lack of separation between the mind and the book. Bechdel finds herself in the book. In it she is safe. She will find herself in Woolf's book as well, in a move that tries to ensure the continuation of being –and being safe– in a work of literature. The book is not an object, like the rest of the outside world, from which the subject can cut herself off to protect herself, but it is part of the mind and the mind can be part of it. The set-up of the frames on pages 134 and 135 is suggestive: all the frames except one pull the reader back and place her at a distance from the scene, as well as on a higher plane, whether it is only slightly higher or it means looking at the scene from above. Seeing from a distance shows an emotional distance from what must have been experienced, at the time, with intense feelings: the child's need for her mother's attention, which will be disappointed in a few more pages. Looking from above shows the intellectual superiority of the adult reliving the childhood nursery memory with a different understanding. The only frame that has a close up is the one in which Bechdel reads Dr. Seuss' book. This choice of frame suggests intimacy. Unlike figure 6, where close-up turns looking from above, in a move that underlines that Bechdel relates to her mind as an object, the first panel of figure 8 emphasizes the inseparability of the mind from the book.

Bechdel seems to except Dr. Seuss' book from the fate of ordinary objects, and give it the status of a subject-object, which in Winnicott's terms we could call a transitional object. The notion of the transitional object is at the core of Winnicott's theory about the development of the subject and it is associated with his very specific idea of the origins of creativity. The transitional object has played a central role in the develop-

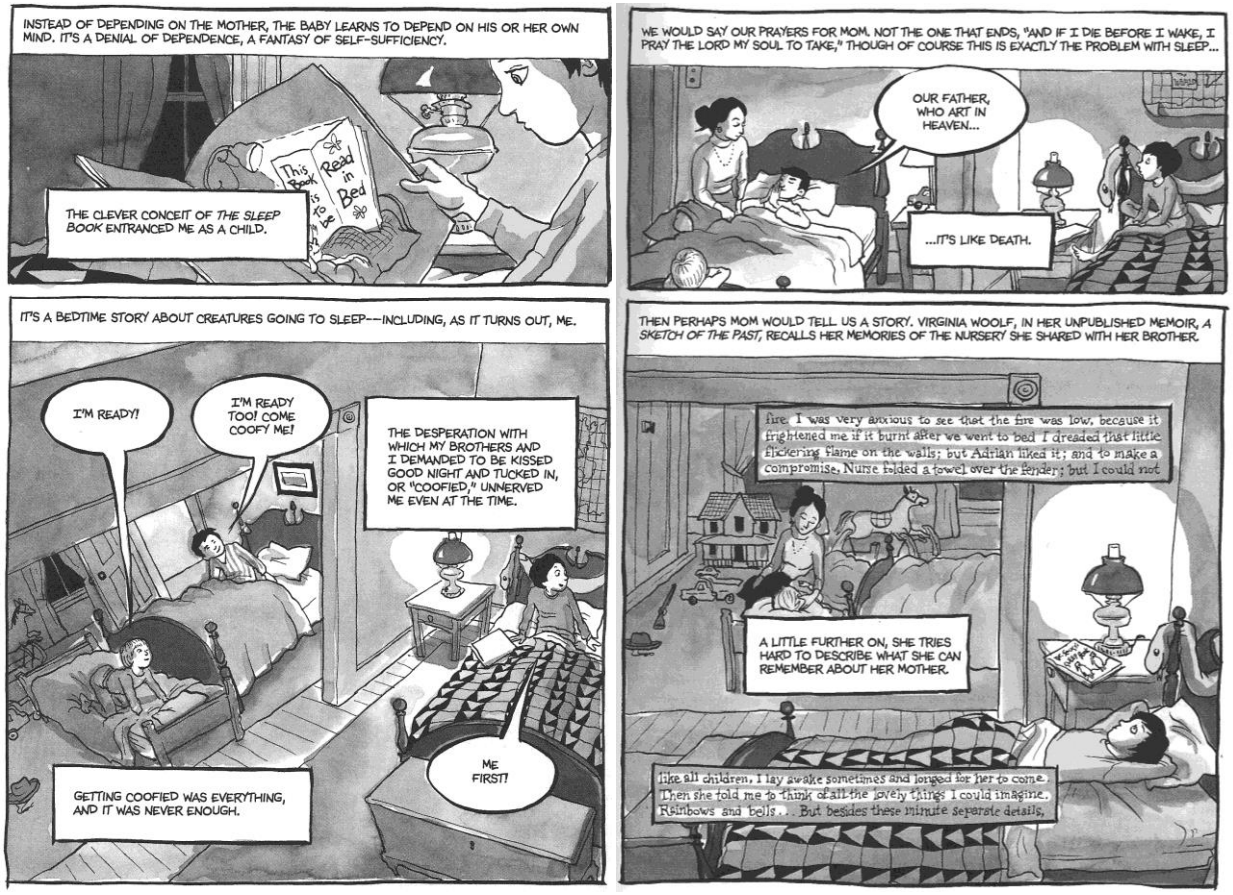

Figure 8. In the first frame a close-up of little Alison reading a children's book she finds herself to be part of. In the next panels, images from her child's bedroom continue, from a distance this time, while captions show how a grown-up Alison finds herself in Woolf's book, too. From Alison Bechdel's *Are You My Mother?*, 134-135 (Copyright © 2012 by Alison Bechdel.)

ment of Bechdel's idea of the relationship between subjects and the world. In my reading, Bechdel uses *Dr. Seuss' Sleep Book* and Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* like transitional objects, in an attempt to revise her relationship to the world. In that sense, the books replace the mother not only in the false-self mode, as props used in order to barricade and sustain the over-developed mental function, but also as partners in the re-creation of a facilitating environment which allows for the development of creativity.

Winnicott developed his theory of the origins of creativity focusing not on artistic creativity, but more generally on creativity as the force that drives people to discover themselves and the world while retaining a feeling that life is meaningful. Art for Winnicott is one of the many manifestations of a creative approach to life, and a

psychoanalytic focus on art inevitably loses sight of or even obscures the primary processes which enable this approach to happen and take the form of art or other forms (2005, 93). This creative approach lies in the individual's relation to external phenomena: it is creative apperception as opposed to a compliant relation to the environment, when the world is experienced merely as something the self needs to fit in with. In short, creativity is to be able to be in touch with facts of life without feeling that life is futile and meaningless (ibid., 87). The foundations of this approach to life are laid very early, when the infant is initiated into an objective relationship with the world.

Winnicott uses his theory of transitional objects to explain how the shock of loss of omnipotence can be coped with when there is sufficient environmental care, and how this process enables the development of the creative impulse. He makes it clear that "it is not the object, of course, that is transitional. The object represents the infant's transition from a state of being merged with the mother to a state of being in relation to the mother as something outside and separate" (ibid., 19-20). Between the moment when the infant does not perceive objects as separated from it and the moment when it can recognize objects as belonging to an objective reality, there is a process of transition when objects are "subjective-objects" (ibid., 95). A subjective object is an object perceived as something separate from the infant, and yet as something that the infant has created with the power of its mind. A nurturing and holding environment accepts as a matter-of-fact, and not as madness, the paradox that the infant "creates an object but the object would not have been created as such if it had not already been there" (ibid.). At the beginning of this process is the subtle beginning of the infant's loss of omnipotence, the feeling that whatever happens in its environment happens because the infant has created it or brought it about. At the end of the process is the transitional object's dispersion into the whole cultural field:

> [I]n health the transitional object does not 'go inside' nor does the feeling about it necessarily undergo repression. It is not forgotten and it is not mourned. It loses meaning, and this is because the transitional phenomena have become diffused, have become spread out over the whole intermediate territory between 'inner psychic reality' and 'the external world as perceived by two persons in common' […]. At this point my subject widens out into

> that of play, and of artistic creativity and appreciation, and of religious feeling, and of dreaming, and also of fetishism […] etc. (Winnicott 2005, 7)

Art, then, is part of the subject's negotiation of the intermediate space between the subjective and the objective, or between inner reality and external phenomena.

For Bechdel books enable her to do this: it is perhaps the only kind of help she feels she has in her struggle to negotiate. In my reading, when Bechdel says, at the end of the book, that her mother has given her a way out –out of this feeling of being cut off (Bechdel 2012, 287)– she means books. He mother taught her how to read books and how to write them too, therefore her relationship with books, and the kind of creativity that allows her to use them like transitional objects and reconsider and reform her relationship to the world through them, comes from her mother.

Bechdel's way of incorporating Woolf's novel in her memoir attests to such a reading: she turns other people's texts into images, making them her own by tracing them with her own hand, not through a kind of transmediality, where an idea originally expressed with one medium is expressed with a different medium, but through a kind of transubstantiation.[7] In figure 1, for example, Bechdel copies the pages of Dr. Seuss' book by hand. But she doesn't do this only with books with images: figure 7 shows how she does it with text too. A part of a page from a book by Winnicott is reproduced by hand, copying the type font realistically as if it were an image, and is put in the panel like a proper image, while a caption with "real", proper text emphasizes by contrast the image-quality of Winnicott's excerpt. Bechdel does the same with Woolf's novel, as one can see in figure 9. Turning in that way the text into

[7] The term transubstantiation originates in the dogmas of the Catholic and the Orthodox Church: according to these dogmas the bread and wine used during the Eucharist do not merely represent the body and blood of Christ, but the substance of the bread becomes that of the body of Christ and the substance of the wine becomes that of his blood. Bruno Latour makes use of the term to argue that a certain ontological constancy of substances is maintained throughout the sequential transformations of material samples into scientific data (1999, 64). Vicki Kirby reads in Latour's use of transubstantiation what Latour's work on actor-network theory and quantum physics have in common: they both invite us to rethink identity outside the binaries of the Cartesian framework, which characterizes a representational approach to knowledge. They allow us to think of identities as "emergent 'mutualities'" where objects of representations are inseparable from their representations (Kirby 2011, 85-88). In my use of the transubstantiation, influenced by those of Latour and Kirby, I mean that Bechdel's drawing of text, that is, her bodily tracing of text, produces an image which is not a representation of the text, but the text itself (since it retains the textual qualities of the text) made her own by means of being turned into image. That is Bechdel has a way of representing something without putting to practice what representationalism does: what she represents and the result of her representation are not ontologically disconnected.

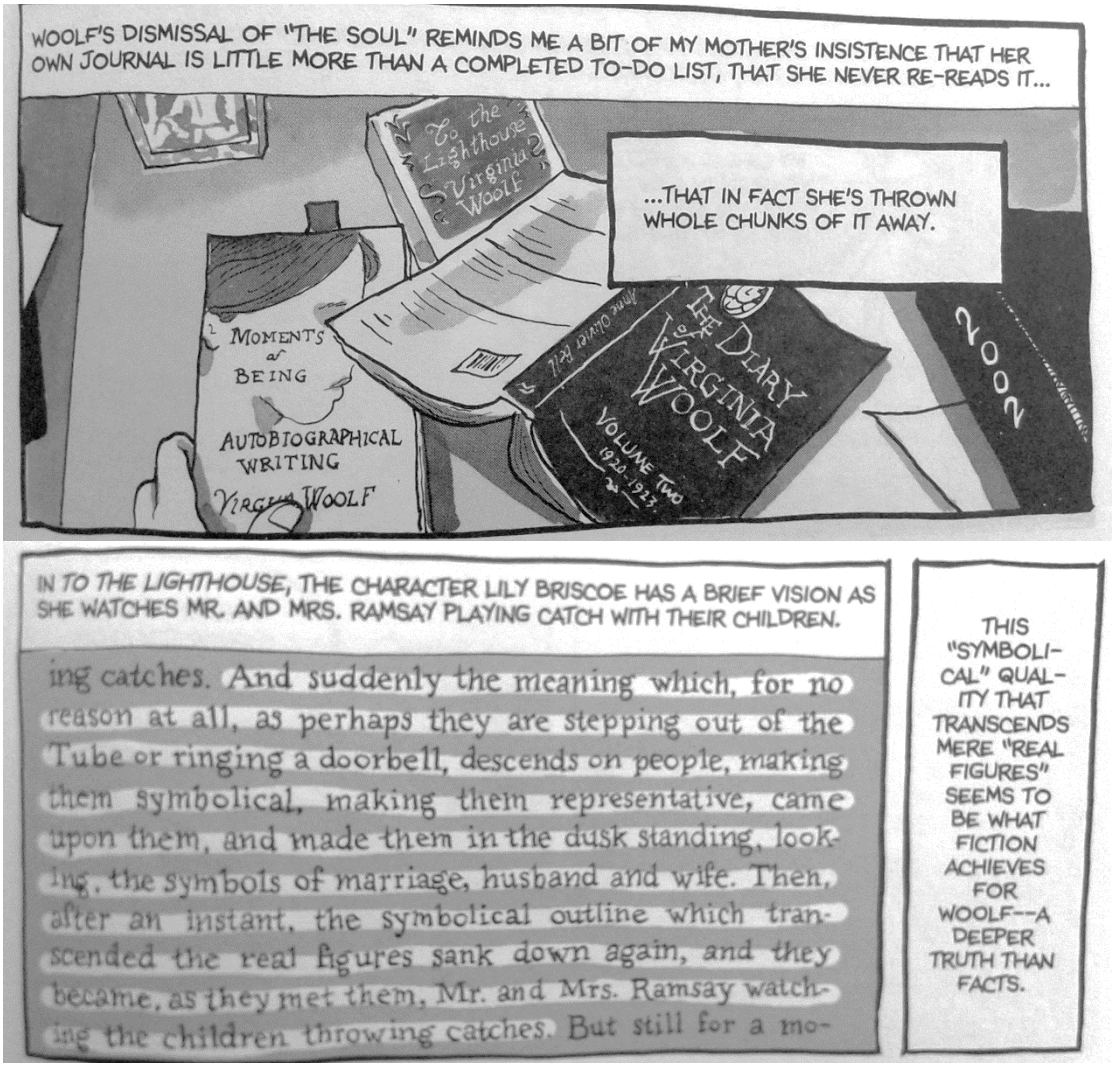

Figure 9. Woolf's novel on Bechdel's desk, and an excerpt from it incorporated in the memoir as image. Bechdel's way of making other texts her own. From Alison Bechdel's *Are You My Mother?*, 17 and 29 (Copyright © 2012 by Alison Bechdel.)

image while allowing it to retain the qualities of a text is in my reading putting to practice the paradox of the transitional object: it is like creating it, yet creating it exactly as if it was found to already be there.

If *To the Lighthouse* is indeed a transitional object in that way, then it stands between the object of object-relating (when an object is not much more than a bundle of projections of the subject) and the object of object-using, when the object is a thing-in-itself, which the subject recognizes as belonging to the world outside of the subject's omnipotent control (Winnicott 1969, 712). *To the Lighthouse* is created by Bechdel and me at the same time as it is found to already be there. And a diffractive

reading will enable it to be destroyed, and survive this destruction, so that it can be of use to Bechdel in her effort to reconfigure her relationship with the world. Because, until we read it together with Woolf's novel, we cannot fully appreciate the possibilities Bechdel's approach to reading entails, or rather we cannot fully extend these possibilities to the whole world outside reading, which a diffractive reading with Woolf's novel allows us to do.

Jars on nerves

Bechdel opens her graphic memoir/essay with an epigraph from *To the Lighthouse*: "For nothing was simply one thing" (2012, epigraph, Woolf 2000, 203). A look into the context of the epigraph may explain what Bechdel means with it: why use this phrase to open a book about her mother, about memory and about writing a memoir? A phrase which argues that any one object is more than one –what place has it got in a memoir? Is it there to warn the reader about the tricky, mood-specific, nature of memory and its capacity to turn unitary objects into multiple ones? Is it a comment on the inaccuracy of any one perspective of an object? Having elaborated on Bechdel's idea of the relationship between subject and object, this last one seems to be the most likely answer, for her idea is the one we would find in the Kantian philosophical tradition and in traditional psychoanalysis: that the subject (at least *she* as a subject) cannot have access to the thing-in-itself, so the multiplicity of any object is an illusory consequence of the ontological distance between subject and object. Coming, as it does, right after the title page, *Are You My Mother?*, it seems to imply that Bechdel's mother is also multiple in that sense: her real self is elusive, and different contradictory perspectives of her are mere –incomplete– attempts at capture. However, as suggested earlier, read together with Woolf's perspective on the nature of the relationship between subject and object (and I believe Bechdel creates these "openings" in her text in which other texts enter precisely in order to enable such forms of reading-together to take place) may make us see her overall philosophical argument differently.

The quote is found in the third part of Woolf's novel, called "The Lighthouse", in which the long-anticipated voyage to the Lighthouse takes place, a long-delayed expedition, for it takes place ten years after the first part of the novel, where the 6-year-old James and his mother Mrs. Ramsay plan it with excitement for the morning after.

> The Lighthouse was then a silvery, misty-looking tower with a yellow eye that opened suddenly and softly in the evening. Now–
> James looked at the Lighthouse. He could see the white-washed rocks; the tower, stark and straight; he could see windows in it; he could even see washing spread on the rocks to dry. So that was the Lighthouse, was it?
> No, the other was also the Lighthouse. For nothing was simply one thing. The other was the Lighthouse too. In the evening one looked up and saw the eye opening and shutting and the light seemed to reach them in that airy sunny garden where they sat. (Woolf 2000, 202)

As the Ramsays approach, sailing, the Lighthouse, James is given a new image of the Lighthouse, widely different from the image he had of it as a boy of six. His first thought is that this, the new image, perceived from a shorter distance, seen and not remembered, seen through the eyes of a soberer almost grown-up person, is the Lighthouse, and not the other. A hard, clear image of a Lighthouse less clothed in mystery and more realistic, a family's house, with windows and clothes drying on its rocks. But he checks himself: no, the other is also the Lighthouse. The Lighthouse across the bay which shed its light on their garden. The paradox that the competing images are both true is what lies in the heart of the novel's approach to reality: to embrace the contradictory nature of things is to achieve a deeper understanding and knowledge of the world.

Philosopher Jaakko Hintikka studies the relationship between the philosophical ideas and the literary techniques expressed or practiced within the famous Bloomsbury group. The interaction and cross-fertilization that occurred during the intellectual conversations of this group of friends led, according to him, to similarities between works of fiction and philosophical works, the overlooking of which nothing but "the increasing departmentalization of the humanistic studies" (and he writes this in 1979) can explain (Hintikka 1979, 5). For Hintikka, Woolf's fiction tacitly expresses notions

about the nature of reality and the subject's access to it which show affinity with Bertrand Russell's metaphysical and epistemological doctrines. These doctrines are outside the scope of this thesis, for it is other associations I want to make between Woolf and philosophical ideas. But the key point here is that her novels raise philosophical problems, sometimes explicitly, sometimes indirectly and most importantly through her style of writing. Woolf's art is "fictionalized epistemology" (ibid., 6), because her novels ask philosophical questions which are rather "on the epistemological and metaphysical side" (ibid., 5). The problem of reality is not of secondary importance for Woolf as a novelist, but rather her main enterprise. It appears not only as part of her subject matter, but as part of her narrative techniques, which present the reader with a view of life much deeper and complex that the one they had before reading the novel. This is the main reason that Woolf abandoned the convention of the omniscient narrator for the sake of what Erich Auerbach calls "multipersonal representation of reality" (ibid., 7), a technique which constructs a reality out of the different perspectives of the many characters in her novels. Thus, Woolf's characters are the "means of their author's search for reality" (ibid., 8).

Woolf describes her characters indirectly through other character's impressions of them. In Erich Auerbach's words, "there actually seems to be no viewpoint at all outside the novel from which the people and events within it are observed, any more than there seems to be an objective reality apart from what is the consciousness of the characters" (2003, 534). The devices employed by Woolf to achieve this (stream of consciousness, interior monologue) had been used before, but with different objectives. It is characteristic of Woolf alone that these devices make this particular point about reality and the knowledge of reality which I will venture to argue.

In *To the Lighthouse*, the question of knowledge is organized mostly around the figure of Mrs. Ramsay. Mrs. Ramsay, like the Lighthouse, embodies the contradictory nature of reality. It is (getting to) know(ing) her and the ways that she knows that is the heart of the novel. She is the great mystery that needs to be solved, and at the same time her connection to people and the world stands for a certain approach to knowledge. Somehow, in the figure of the mother, for Woolf as well as Bechdel, lies the answer to the question of how subjects gain knowledge of the world, for Mrs. Ramsay is a fictionalization of Woolf's mother, Julia Stephen, and she is the object of a certain

desire that Lily Briscoe feels. A desire to know her fully. Which Lily fears is not possible:

> One wanted fifty pairs of eyes to see with, she reflected. Fifty pairs of eyes were not enough to get round that one woman with, she thought. Among them, must be one that was stone blind to her beauty. One wanted most some secret sense, fine as air, with which to steal through keyholes and surround her where she sat knitting, talking, sitting silent in the window alone; which took to itself and treasured up like the air which held the smoke of the steamer, her thoughts, her imaginations, her desires. What did the hedge mean to her, what did the garden mean to her, what did it mean to her when a wave broke? (Woolf 2000, 214)

To have fifty pairs of eyes, and to be the air that holds her thoughts might be enough to enable one to know Mrs. Ramsay, but one cannot do this being one person with a single pair of eyes. Being one person means one can only acquire partial knowledge. But one can add to that one perspective: one can look at people through other people's eyes. One can gain a deeper understanding through multiple perspectives. Thinking of another, less significant, character, Mr. Tansley, Lily Briscoe realizes that:

> Half one's notions of other people were, after all, grotesque. They served private purposes of one's own. He did for her instead of a whipping-boy. She found herself flagellating his lean flanks when she was out of temper. If she wanted to be serious about him she had to help herself to Mrs. Ramsay's sayings, to look at him though her eyes. (Woolf 2000, 214)

One additional quote is necessary, however, to argue that Woolf's idea about the knowledge of reality a subject can acquire is something more than the mere addition of the multiple perspectives in a way that enables one to move from the subjective perspective towards a more accurate objective one. For I believe, Woolf does not mean to say that the character's wisdom is simply to accept the inadequacy of their perspective and to look through other people's eyes for a fuller one, but instead wisdom is the move from a conventional idea of objective knowledge towards a different one.

Feminist literary and memory studies scholar Marianne Hirsch argues in her book *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, that *To the Lighthouse* is "propelled by a desire of understanding, by a series of questions which fit Peter Brooks' schema of explanatory narrative" and that "[t]he primary enigma in the novel is the figure of the mother –the beautiful and mysterious Mrs. Ramsay" (1989, 109). Lily, like Bechdel, is an artist: she paints. Throughout the novel, she is working on a painting of Mrs. Ramsay. Hirsch reads Lily's work on her painting as a way of approaching Mrs. Ramsay: "painting is both a way out of what she experienced as the wish for childhood fusion […] and a way back into it, but differently, a way to know Mrs. Ramsay, to 'spell out' the secret she locks up inside her, like 'treasures in the tombs of kings, bearing sacred inscriptions.'" (ibid.)

There is a scene in *To the Lighthouse* that holds the answer to both Woolf's and Bechdel's (and my) question: how does one know? And I may add: how does one know in a way that does not lock one into one's mind, in a way that does not lock one outside the world? Lily is sitting with her head on Mrs. Ramsay's lap, in Mrs. Ramsay's bedroom, and she is thinking: how can she know Mrs. Ramsay more?

> What art was there, known to love or cunning, by which one pressed into those secret chambers? What device for becoming, like waters poured into one jar, inextricably the same, one with the object one adored? Could the body achieve it, or the mind, subtly mingling in the intricate passages of the brain? or the heart? Could loving, as people called it, make her and Mrs. Ramsay one? For it was not knowledge but unity that she desired, not inscriptions on tablets, nothing that could be written in any language known to men, but intimacy, which is knowledge, she had thought, leaning her head on Mrs. Ramsay's knee. (Woolf 2000, 57)

Hirsch disagrees with critics who have read this passage as showing Lily's artistic and personal immaturity. They are reading Freudian psychoanalysis into it by seeing it as a sign of Lily's desire for fusion with the mother, which prevents her from reaching individuality. In that light Mrs. Ramsay's death is the only way for Lily to experience the necessary mourning for individual and artistic growth, since it occasions a rupture

between Lily and Mrs. Ramsay.[8] Hirsch, on the other hand, believes that Lily is looking for another knowledge, another artistic language, which does not presuppose a separation, and which does "not oppose knowledge and intimacy, but will allow for what we might call their tautological interrelation" (1989, 111). My reading is similar to Hirsch's. This can be the answer to Bechdel's view of the over-grown mind as the seat of knowledge: a knowledge which is intimacy, which does not depend on an essential separation between the knower and the known, a knowledge of the soma, which does not need to be followed by a sense of disconnection from experience, or by an overarching editing voice that prevents the experiences from being spontaneously expressed.

Bechdel read through Woolf's insights moves away from the "tower position" in the plexiglass dome, which we also saw in Miller's patient's dream and which Louise Westling, literary and an environmental studies scholar, describes, quoting Hume, as the transcendental philosopher's position above other men and expelled from their society: "that forlorn solitude, in which I am plac'd in my philosophy […] Fain wou'd I run into the crowd" (quoted in Westling 1999, 862). The desire for not-knowing, for turning the mental function into something less overarching, need not be an abandonment of all knowing but a desire for another kind of knowledge. The letting-go of knowing which Winnicott talks about may be seen in this light as an opening up of the possibility for a kind of knowing which is rooted in the psyche-soma, and not cut off from it. This allows the reader to imagine a knowledge that is synonymous – not opposite– with physical and emotional intimacy and connection with the world.

But there is another question that Bechdel and Woolf ask together. Or rather, that I ask together with Woolf and Bechdel; for what follows, for me, the question "how do we know things?" is "what is the nature of the things known that allows for them to be known in that way?" This last question, therefore, is what the ontological presuppositions behind Woolf and Bechdel's approach to knowledge are. I have implied before that Woolf's fiction does not only make an epistemological claim. Woolf does not simply speak of the relativism of any perception we may have of the world, but goes beyond this to argue that the world itself is multiple. She talks of

[8] It seems to me that they forget that Mrs. Ramsay is not entirely gone with death but comes back in the final scene, shortly before Lily completes the painting and exclaims "I have had my vision" (Woolf 2000, 226).

ontology, too. Paul Tolliver Brown, who studies the intersection of modern literature and contemporary science, supports that "Woolf's exploration of the fuzzy boundaries between subjects and objects coincides with the quantum physical understanding of a holistic universe" (2009, 43). In Mrs. Ramsey and his kitchen table. Mrs. Ramsey's dinner table, for example, can be seen as a participatory object, which is altered by the forces of her consciousness (ibid., 48). Westling has also argued that Woolf develops her fictional ontology in the light of her contemporary developments in quantum physics. For Westling, Woolf presents the transcendental Platonic philosophical tradition in the image of Mr. Ramsey in order to reject it. Its assumption of the separation of human consciousness from physical nature, and therefore of mind and body and of the knower from the known, Woolf juxtaposes with a phenomenological approach to knowledge, that goes *through* the body. Westling argues Woolf's approach resembles that of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose philosophy is influenced by his contemporary physics as well, and, therefore, expresses an impulse to move beyond the Cartesian separation of subject and object, a perception of the body not as fixed but as embedded in the flux of timespace, and an idea of the relationship between observer and object of observation as mutually influential (1999, 856-857). She quotes him talking of experience through the body being the only way to perceive the world and concluding that "it is to experience that the ultimate ontological power belongs" (quoted in Westling 1999, 864). Our sensations are co-constitutive of the world because they are the relations between us and the world and at the same time the expression of this relationship.

Lily Briscoe, sitting in front of her painting and looking for the stroke of brush, the composition that will solve her problem, is thinking:

> What was the problem then? She must try to get hold of something that evaded her. It evaded her when she thought of Mrs. Ramsay; it evaded her now when she thought of her picture. Phrases came. Visions came. Beautiful pictures. But what she wished to get hold of was *that very jar on the nerves, the thing itself* before it has been made anything. (Woolf 2000, 209, emphasis added)

The thing itself is not something outside access, or even mediated by art and words. It is the experience. For the jar on the nerves, the event of the nerves registering and

establishing a connection, is the world. The connections are the world. To use Barad's neologism, Woolf's epistemology is onto-epistemology, "the study of practices of knowing in being" (Barad 2007, 185) for she understands knowing practices as intertwined with being.

Bechdel's epistemological crisis, surviving her childhood and being alive and kicking in the process of writing her mother-memoir, seems to ask: Is this reality? (2012, 11) Do I have the right to represent it in writing and drawing, especially when it involves the lives of others too (ibid., 5)? And tries to qualify: small *I thinks* are everywhere in the memoir. She wonders, for example: "What did I see in her [her mother's] face?" (ibid., 179). She exclaims: "I don't know anything" (ibid. 23). She vacillates between different perspectives: "I'm wavering between thinking, well, isn't everyone's family turbulent? …and thinking, oh my god, my family was so fucked up." (ibid., 103-104). But read together with Woolf's onto-epistemology, Bechdel's approach alters: she can be allowed to have more confidence in her perception, and to say, beginning with the epigraph "For nothing was simply one thing" (2012, epigraph), that the multiplicity lies as much in the reality as in the perspective.

Conclusion

This chapter reads Bechdel and Woolf together as texts that do philosophy in the form of art. Bechdel suffers from an epistemological crisis that takes the form of a feeling of being cut off from the world and of doubting the reality of her perceptions. This crisis is explained by the author as caused by a faulty early caretaking that resulted in the development of a false self: a mentally overactive creature doomed to the kind of life philosophers lead, a life of isolated superiority. In my diffractive reading, Woolf comes in to help Bechdel change her overdeveloped mental function for a more embodied and embedded idea of knowledge. What at first feels like a letting go of knowledge altogether, soon turns out to be a more accurate description of the relationship between subject and external reality than the one Bechdel's drawing and writing expressed.

In the following chapter, the notion of the false self will be used again to explain Bechdel's approach to politics. We will see how a diffractive reading of Bechdel with Rich can affect changes to Bechdel's capacity to be political by creatively reconfiguring the world.

“The moment when a feeling enters the body” politics, compliance and roof walking (Bechdel and Rich’s politics of writing)

Introduction

If a work of art is considered political when it reflects and draws attention to sociopolitical issues, engages in critique and effects interventions in society, there are good reasons Bechdel’s earlier work, *Dykes to Watch Out For* (2009), is considered political. The most notable political issues in her early work are the visibility of queer identities and a feminist focus on the division of the private and the public (Chute 2010, 177). Bechdel’s memoir *Are You My Mother?* follows in the footsteps of this previous work by discussing the same topics. In a move characteristic of autobiographical narratives, however, critiques of institutions like compulsive heterosexuality, gender inequality and the institution of marriage are put forth from a personal perspective, through effects on her relationship with her mother. Autobiography, found in a wide range of genres, has been pivotal for feminist reexaminations of concepts of women’s and queer people’s life issues, such as growing up as a certain gender, sexuality, relationships, political coming-of-age and empowerment. It has also been used as a means for women, queers and colonized subjects to write themselves into history, make subjectivities visible, reflect on the relational aspect of subjectivity and question the universality of the solitary self. Autobiographical narratives, in that sense, have been both articulations of oppressed people’s experiences and means of doing feminist theory (Smith and Watson 1998, 5).

Drawing attention to queer and feminist issues and critiquing oppressive institutions from the point of view of those who feel their consequences in their lives sounds like a serious political project. Autobiographical writing has been of great use for many marginalized groups in discovering that experiences that have felt uniquely personal

are in fact widely spread and common, exposing the structural oppressions that hide behind what is seen as a matter of personal responsibility or adequacy (Swindels 1995, 207). In the memoir, however, Bechdel expresses doubts about the political value of *Are You My Mother?* and of autobiographical narratives in general. Although she is explicit in her admiration for the work of Adrienne Rich, who is outspoken in her insistence on the political importance of autobiographical writing, Bechdel casts doubt on the foundation of the feminist maxim "the personal is political": the epistemological value of experience (the "epistemological crisis" that we discussed in the previous chapter). There is, moreover, in Bechdel, the internalized critical voice of her mother, which argues that because of its personal focus, her art is irrelevant to anyone apart from herself and a form of narcissistic indulgence (Bechdel 2012, 5, 11). There is, as well, her belief, influenced by Winnicott's psychoanalytic theory of the self, that, unless the subject interacts with the world in a way that creatively negotiates the relationship between external and internal phenomena, then the subject is bound to be compliant in a way that Bechdel associates with political conservatism. Bechdel does not feel her artistic practice helps her a lot in that either. This chapter surveys the diverse ways in which *Are You My Mother?* does politics, examines the reasons behind Bechdel's self-doubt and brings in Rich in order to show how the memoir, read diffractively with Rich's poetry, can do politics in a way that would satisfy even its severest critic: Bechdel herself.

In my reading of Bechdel and Rich, I use the elaboration of philosopher Jacques Rancière's on the politics of art and writing in *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (2010), where he inquires into the meaning of political efficacy in art. Rancière gives a comprehensive definition of what the qualities of political art have been historically, but he also gives his own, more specific and quite different, explanation of where art's political power lies: in creating dissensus, a radical break between sense and our way of making sense of it. His account is useful for the purpose of this chapter for two reasons. The first is that his point of view, which focuses on how art and literature do politics in ways that are particular to only art and literature, resonates with Rosenblatt's theory that the work of literature is a transactive event, which informs my practice of diffractive reading, as explained in the methodology chapter. Rosenblatt's distinction between the efferent and aesthetic stance in reading also allows for a variety of modes through which a work of art can be political, but, in

accordance to Rancière, suggests that only one of these modes is being political *by way of* being particularly a work of literature. The second reason is that Bechdel's work alone has political value for all the different approaches to the politics of art that Rancière enumerates, but a diffractive reading of Bechdel and Rich brings about a kind of political power that is very close to the point of view that Rancière actually advocates.

In order to demonstrate the latter, I will start with a reading of Bechdel's approach to the political value of her work as it appears in her memoir, but also in her early work to the extent that it reflects on her as a political artist. I will see how Winnicott's theory of the self, in particular his notions of the compliant false self and the disobedient true self, which Bechdel uses to explain her approach to politics, can enable one to understand Bechdel's deprecation of this aspect of her work. Following this, I will demonstrate how a different nature of the politics of art is in practice – which would satisfy even Bechdel herself– when Bechdel is read diffractively with Rich. In that final part of the chapter, I will closely read a few pages from *Are You My Mother?* that depict a dream Bechdel had, in which her family home is transformed into a precipice of ice, together with a poem by Rich in which the speaker identifies with builders standing on a roof. My reading will focus on how the two works speak of the act of writing as putting the writer in a precarious situation, and show how the images they create produce an aesthetic rupture that has political power because they change the meaning of familiar images.

My choice to read Bechdel's work together with Rich is based on the fact that Bechdel refers to Rich when she wants to defend herself against the critical voice of her mother, who argues that autobiographical writing is narcissistic and irrelevant. Rich is a defendant of the political importance of personal writing, both in her prose and in her verse. But there is a second reason behind my choice: a line by Rich quoted in *Are You My Mother?* that reads "The moment when a feeling enters the body is political" (Bechdel 2012, 186) (see figure 11). Bechdel found this quote in notes she took during a lecture Rich gave in the 1980s, which Bechdel attended. It originates, not in an essay, but in a series of poems entitled "The Blue Ghazals", in the volume *The Will to Change* (Rich 1984, 120-123). It is in this quote that I see that reading Bechdel's work diffractively with Rich's possibly makes them politically effective in Rancière's sense of the word, meaning they have the power to affect changes in the

relationship between sense and meaning. Rich's poetry, I believe, better than her essays, can shed light on the ways feelings affected in unpredictable ways by literature or art can reframe the ways we make sense of the world, which is where the radical politics of art lies for Rancière. Rich's essays may advocate the importance of voicing personal experience as a political tool, but her poetry practices a politics that goes beyond the unquestioned acceptance of experience, and towards an examination of its foundations and an opening up of experiential possibilities.

Politics

It is generally presumed, Rancière says, that art can be politically effective in one of two ways: by showing the marks of power on the world and on people or by leaving the sphere strictly allotted to art in order to become a social practice (Rancière 2010, 134-135). In the first case, the efficacy of art depends on an understanding of art's relation to life that follows the mimetic tradition[9]. In Rancière's words "the logic of mimesis consists in conferring on the artwork the power of the effects that it is supposed to elicit on the behaviour of spectators" (ibid., 136). The old-fashioned belief in the pedagogical power of art and the contemporary trust in the ability of art to make us feel a certain way or come to certain conclusions about the world are not so different, because they are both bound to the same underlying logic. This is a causal logic, according to which what the audience/reader sees/reads is a set of signs arranged in a specific order by the artist's/writer's intention, and these signs arranged in this order compel the recipient of the artwork to understand and interact with the world differently (ibid., 135-136). Art, then, is politically radical when it compels us to revolt by revealing the forces that keep us contained. Rancière calls this idea of art's political efficacy "representational mediation" (ibid., 137) and sides with its

[9] *Mimesis* is the Greek word for imitation. A literary work according to the mimetic critical tradition in aesthetic and literary theory is understood to reflect an external reality (Baldick 2001, 157). The mimetic tradition began with Plato and Aristotle and continues until today, taking many, sometimes conflicting, approaches toward reality and how it is represented in literature. Rancière seems to have in mind two specific features of the mimetic tradition when he talks about it: the first is the idea that reflecting of reality entails separation –an acknowledgment that the representation of the thing is not the real thing (Eagleton 2003, 18)– and the second is an instrumentalist approach toward the political power of realism to engender revolutionary impulses within the reader through a transformation of consciousness (Taylor 2007, 156).

critics, who find the mimetic approach problematic on the basis of there being no proof of a direct relation between the model of behaviour an artwork provides and the behaviour of the spectators after coming in contact with the artwork. This idea of linear causality, moreover, entails the separation of doing and seeing/reading: unless an artwork succeeds in inducing the reader/viewer to act or think in a certain way, it is not politically efficient (ibid.).

In the second case, art is political not because it induces a certain behaviour through representation, but because it creates a community via the bodies of its audience: the artwork brings the audience together, enacting a common and the audience embodies the common by way of reading/viewing the artwork, and thus participates in it. Rancière argues that, although the second approach to the political efficacy of art – which he calls "ethical immediacy" (ibid.)– has been guised as anti-representation, it also relies on the same assumption that art is political only if it is effective in "real life". What was supposed to solve the problem of representation, a certain image of political art as performative, as enacting politics, simply reproduces the assumption of an ontological separation between art and life, insofar as art cannot be considered political without effecting change in communities. Rancière is instead interested in how art can be political by way of being art, regardless of its effect in a realm that is allocated outside it.

The political efficiency of art lies, for Rancière, in "a suspension of every determinate relation correlating the production of art forms and a specific social function" (ibid., 138). He places the origins of this idea in the notion of aesthetic distance, which he interprets not as the mere enjoyment of beauty combined with indifference for art's social underpinnings, but as a kind of radical dissociation between the sensory and the ways we make sense of it, which sets forth a process of reconfiguring the political. Politics, for Rancière, is what breaks with the "natural" order that assigns people, bodies, things, thoughts and feelings to certain realms. Speaking specifically about literature, he writes:

> The politics of literature is not the politics of its writers. It does not deal with their personal commitment to the social and political issues and struggles of their times. Nor does it deal with the modes of representation of political events or the social structure and the social struggles in their books. [...]

> Politics is first of all a way of framing, among sensory data, a specific sphere of experience. It is a partition of the sensible, of the visible and the sayable, which allows (or does not allow) some specific data to appear. [...] The politics of literature thus means that literature as literature is involved in this partition of the visible and the sayable, in this intertwining of being, doing and saying that frames a polemical common world. (Rancière 2010, 152)

This kind of political efficacy of art and literature, he believes, lies in *dissensus*, that is, "a conflict between *sense* and *sense*" (ibid., 139, emphasis in the original), between a sensory display and the act of making sense of it. Effects of dissensus, produced by art, invent "new ways of making sense of the sensible, new configurations between the visible and the invisible, and between the audible and the inaudible, new distributions of space and time –in short, new bodily capacities" (ibid.). Dissensus does not make the viewer/reader follow a path from seeing to understanding or from understanding to acting, but instead makes the viewer/reader move into a world different from the given, where the relationship between sense and meaning is differently defined and expressed, therefore enables a world of different possibilities. Rosenblatt explains how this happens during reading, and how this world is at the same time a world framed anew and a common world: in her transactive theory of reading she explains how reading for aesthetic purposes allows for a focus on the affective element of meaning-making, which makes reading at the same time a subjective experience and an event of communication. Rosenblatt's definition of the aesthetic stance in reading, when the reader is reading with a focus on the feelings and sensations they experience, a focus on what the words are stirring up, the experiential aspect of meaning, sounds like Rancière's aesthetic distance: it brings a distancing from reality in the sense that it leads the reader to suspend their attitude towards external reality as they know it (ibid., 32). This allows reader and text to become an environment for each other: the reader responds to stimuli offered by the text, rather than reality as known before the reading, and yet the stimuli the reader responds to draw on the reader's resources of experience and sensibilities that have already been there (ibid., 42-43). This is when "the boundary between inner and outer world breaks down, and the literary work of art, as so often remarked, leads us into a new world" (ibid., 12). In that moment, changes in "bodily capacities" (to use a phrase Rancière uses) can take place, where bodily capacities means ways to use your senses, ways to

be affected by feelings and ways for senses and feelings to be linked with affective meaning. The newly framed world may be subjective but it is also common: its existence is formed on the basis of the text, in communion with it, not completely subjectively. It is this subjective-objective nature of it that gives the work of literature the power to affect the ways we see and interpret the world, like "real" experiences "to be reflected on from any angle important to [the reader] as a human being" (ibid.). It is because the literary experience is like every experience –according to historian Joan W. Scott's definition of experience– both a sense and a meaning (intertwined with each other), as well as both collective and individual, that it can both confirm and upset what is already known, enabling people to learn from it differently from each other and at the same time enabling change to happen in the shared culture of meaning (Scott 1991, 793).

Rancière's idea of the political power of the dissensus that art produces in the reader seems to depend on an approach to the literary experience similar to Rosenblatt's account of the aesthetic stance. The other definitions of the political efficacy of art that he describes can be understood as the products of what Rosenblatt calls efferent reading, reading with a focus on information that can be extracted from a text, which can be found in the work of literature but is not what defines the work of literature as such. The other two ways in which art can be political that Rancière discusses, that is, by "representational mediation" and by building community, are politics but not the kind of politics art does by way of being art. That is, one can learn about the powers that affect us and be led to political action by reading a manifesto or another kind of writing, not necessarily or exclusively literary texts or other art works. The writings of Hitler, Rosenblatt says, might arouse emotions of hate and lead a reader to engage in mob action, but this would still be an efferent reading (Rosenblatt 1978, 45). Likewise, one can build community in ways other than doing art. Literary work can do politics in all ways together, it is a spectrum like the efferent and aesthetic stances are spectrums. However, it is in the aesthetic stance's ability to make us focus on how our feelings respond to the senses literature evokes –and consequently allow for changes in the relationship between senses and feelings– where the political power of art *as art* lies. In this section, entitled "Politics", I want to focus on how Bechdel's work (the memoir that is the subject of the thesis, and her early work) is political from an efferent reading perspective: what Rancière would call political in the mimetic,

representationalist sense. In the next section, I will show why this is not satisfying for Bechdel herself, before I move on to show how a diffractive reading with Rich can enables dissensus: a politics of the aesthetic stance.

Bechdel remembers admiring and envying her lover Eloise's political disposition, her passion for resistance and the wide scope of her activism. In a series of panels that narrate the beginning of young Alison's relationship with Eloise –at feminist benefit parties, over dinner tables, in subway stations, student apartments, bookstores and lecture halls– Eloise is described or shown to be politically active in a variety of ways. She spends her time at a feminist peace encampment, she participates in demonstrations where she weaves webs around armouries and puts zucchinis through chain links, and she goes to Nicaragua to support the Sandinista Revolution. Eloise believes that everyone can do civil disobedience but Alison is not all that sure (Bechdel 2012, 183-188) (see figure 10). Bechdel sees in Eloise an "aptitude for noncompliance", which she finds "very Winnicottian" (ibid., 188), and which she regrets she cannot share: unlike her lover, Bechdel believes she would have been "compliant to the core" (ibid.) had it not been for her lesbianism and her refusal to be closeted. It is in her sexuality and her outspokenness about it, especially as they appear in her work, that Bechdel locates the bulk of her politics.

Bechdel's early work gives us an idea of Bechdel's notion of political awareness and involvement and it is a good example of what Rancière describes as the political efficacy or art through representational mediation. In *Are You My Mother?* Bechdel mentions the work she did as a cartoonist before the memoir about her father, *Fun Home* (2006), put her in the pantheon of globally celebrated graphic novelists: since her early twenties, her job had been drawing a comic strip about a group of lesbian friends (Bechdel 2012, 42). She mentions the strip in passing when she talks about struggles related to work, like trying to make ends meet with the income of the moderately successful cartoonist (ibid.) and suffering from professional envy and anxiety (ibid., 70-71 and 123). She also mentions it as the cause of disagreements with her mother over the wisdom of making the drawing of lesbian cartoons her life's calling, and the propriety of signing her books with her real name (ibid., 181-182), ignoring her mother's uneasiness about relatives "talking" (ibid., 228).

Figure 10. The beginning of Alison and Eloise's relationship. Alison looks perplexed and impressed while Eloise opens up the world of radical politics to her. From Alison Bechdel's *Are You My Mother?*, 183 (Copyright © 2012 by Alison Bechdel.)

This lesbian comic strip is *Dykes to Watch Out For*, which ran between 1983 and 2008 in fifty alternative newspapers in the USA and was published in eleven volumes

before it was put together in a collected volume called *The Essential Dykes To Watch Out For* (2009). *Dykes* follows the lives of a group of mostly lesbian friends who live in a moderate-sized city of the American Midwest over a course of 25 years. It abounds in political satire, as the characters are enmeshed in and care a lot about politics, on a world, state and community level. Events of global importance, like the Gulf War, the Israel-Palestine conflicts, the Apartheid, the Kosovo War and the USA's participation in them, state politics, like the police state, welfare cuts and business friendly laws, environmental politics, like global warming, mineral fuel consumption and genetically modified foods, are some of the issues the main characters discuss, argue over, participate in demonstrations for and allow to shape their everyday lives in terms of choice of profession, consumer practices and means of commute. A major part of the strip's politics is also a number of issues that particularly concern feminists and queers, like street harassment and rape culture, abortion and reproductive rights, exclusions, discrimination and violence that LGBTQI people face, gay marriage and adoption, raising children in same-sex and interracial families, raising trans children, school bullying, and the conservative turn of the LGBTQI movement. *Dykes* manages to show the effects of abstract forces or faraway events on the lives of the characters, who struggle to keep their community alive in the face of rampant capitalism and its chain stores' attacks on small businesses like the Madwimmin feminist bookstore, to raise children eating local in the face of Monsanto's reign, and to express their political convictions at work in spite of increased conservativism and surveillance. One cannot help earning a valuable education in contemporary politics by enjoying *Dykes* as a fun read. Indeed, what makes Bechdel's work so successful is precisely that her political commentary lies in a combination of words and images that appeal to the readers and are easily understandable (Enszer 2010, 103).

The relevance of *Dykes* for this chapter lies in its reflection on the author herself as a political artist/writer. *Dykes* is not political only because it refers to politics, but also because it has participated in the building of American lesbian popular culture and has played a role in community-building. Bechdel talks about the inspiration and the aspirations behind *Dykes* in the introduction for the collected volume, which is also in comic form: her need to give expression to the "sheer visual plenitude" of the feminist lesbian scene of the 1980s (Bechdel 2009, xii) and to make the everyday life of

lesbians visible to themselves and society at large, as an antidote to the stereotypes of lesbians that prevailed in mainstream culture (ibid., xv). The elation of Bechdel's first years, during which she believed that lesbians were "more evolved" than everybody else because she saw that they were at the forefront of every social movement (ibid.), gave way to disappointment by the sell-out of a big part of the movement when Bechdel realized that lesbians could still be conservative, republican, Christian supporters of American imperialism and deniers of the greenhouse effect. Even at this time, however, she found solace in Adrienne Rich's letter of support, in which the poet writes: "I have always admired the way your work tries to explode dyke essentialism and explore our real humanity" (Rich quoted in Bechdel 2009, xvii). Her work, expressing the contradictions of lesbian lives, is politically radical even when she depicts conservativism: the very act of making lesbian lives visible is radical, "to name the unnamed, to depict the undepicted" (ibid.).

Many young women have told Bechdel that in *Dykes* they met the first lesbians of their lives, or that they found in them some sort of a role model (ibid.). This makes sense, since, for a long time, there were not many other depictions of lesbians in mainstream culture. As Bechdel says in the introduction, "We had no 'L word'. We had no lesbian daytime TV hosts. We had no openly lesbian daughters of the creepy vice president. We had 'Personal Best', and we liked it." (ibid., xv). No wonder *Dykes* is considered to be a landmark that has influenced generations of young lesbians in the USA (Garner, 2008). Bechdel has helped bring lesbians into mainstream culture with her efforts to make *Dykes* accessible and attractive to wider audiences, and, more importantly, has played a great part in the building up of popular lesbian culture and of communities, not only by the content of her work but also by her help in establishing networks of lesbian readers and publishers (Enszer 2010, 105). In that sense, she has practiced politics also in a more performative way, as she has participated in the making of communities. The increase of queer press and publishing houses in the 1980s and 1990s is directly related to the rise in the numbers of people who identified as belonging to queer communities, not only as a consequence but also as a cause, inasmuch as queer identification has to do with being anchored in queer subculture (D'Emilio 1992).

Are You My Mother? is not as ubiquitously reflective of contemporary world politics, but it touches upon issues like access to abortion, being gay and being out as a form of

politics, and it does feature some characters directly involved in radical politics, like Eloise. But to write about being a mother, a daughter, a writer, an artist and a lesbian means to do the feminist political work of making these lives visible. It shows, for one, at least two women artists and writers, Bechdel herself and her mother, "sit[ting] at a desk trying to put words together", which for Rich is a very political act indeed because of the influence that myth-making and imagery-making have over all of us as products of culture: we [writers, readers] look for who we are in texts, and it's important that we find something there that resembles who we are or want to be (1979, 39). It also discusses feminist topics that concerned the generation of Rich and Bechdel's mother. Women of that generation, especially white, middle class, American women, struggled with the difficulties of reconciling society's expectations of them as wives and mothers with their ambitions and goals outside their family life. Helen Bechdel was an intellectual, a poet and an actor, whose academic and artistic ambitions were sacrificed for a life that adhered to the standards of feminine domesticity. We see Helen telling her daughter that reading Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in the 1960s made her angry for the author's privileged position in relation to women like herself, who could not afford to hire other women to do their housework, therefore they could really get into trouble if they adopted Friedan's feminist values and acted "independent" (Bechdel 2012, 172). We see Helen continuing to act in summerstock productions while raising three children, finishing a master's degree and working full time as a teacher; but her daughter also tells us that she stopped writing poetry for three decades, from the moment Alison was born, and we hear Helen regret that she did not pursue an academic career (ibid., 199).

With its focus on family dynamics and intra-psychic processes, the memoir does not forget to take into account the greater issues that have affected Bechdel's parents' lives: compulsive heterosexuality, the institution of marriage, gender inequality. In an interview at the New Yorker Festival, Bechdel said that she views both her memoirs as a kind of political history, where the more open, freer life that she has had as a woman and a lesbian is contrasted with the lives of her thwarted mother and her closeted gay father (Bechdel and Thurman 2014, 17.45-18.45). We see, for example, how her mother's artistic frustration has influenced her daughter's relationship with creativity both in good and bad ways. Artistic competition within the family created an unsafe environment for a child to be creative in (Bechdel 2012, 71-72) at the same

time that the example of creative and lonely parents has shown her how creativity can help her deal with loneliness (ibid., 130). This did not happen in a vacuum. Bechdel explains:

> The drama between my mother and me has partly to do with her bad luck coming of age in the nineteen-fifties. We were on opposite sides of women's liberation, and I got to reap its benefits. With Dad and me, same story: opposite sides of Stonewall. If only my parents had been born later, they might have been happier, and I wouldn't exist. (Bechdel, quoted in Thurman 2012)

The entanglement of creativity with loneliness and antagonism in the family, as well as the difficulty of Helen Bechdel to understand her daughter's artistic expression of her lesbianism, are seen as results of the structural oppressions that hindered Bechdel's parents' self-expression.

Bechdel's sociopolitical commentary and participation in the creation of communities of readers should not be undervalued, even if Rancière does not consider the mimetic idea of political art as the most efficient way of doing politics through art. Such ways of political artistic practice have been vital tools in the hands of feminist writers for over a century. That said, there is another, at least equally important way in which *Are You My Mother?* does politics and it lies in the question: "What makes this work political?" The memoir is, as her mother says, a meta-book (Bechdel 2012, 285), because it describes and reflects upon the process of its own making. As William Bradley has argued, *Are You My Mother?* is an essay about writing non-fiction (2013, 163), and part of its job is to express, in my reading, Bechdel's ambiguous feelings regarding the political importance of writing autobiography, and specifically to relentlessly question *whether it is* a political act, or merely solipsism. According to Hillary L. Chute, Bechdel belongs to a group of cartoonists for whom doing graphic autobiography means to self-reflexively bring to the reader's attention the constructedness of their text by presenting their experience "while refusing to reify 'experience' as the foundational precept of feminist critique" (Chute 2010, 6). The graphic medium is particularly suited for this kind of double move, thanks to its hybrid nature, which allows it to create a simultaneous feeling of distance and intimacy in the reader. In Bechdel's case especially this happens through the

combination of a realistic image that suggests proximity and creates an eyewitness effect, and an often detached and questioning voice-over.

Scott has noted a connection between seeing and knowing: seeing is often taken to be synonymous with experience and experience is often taken to be the source of knowledge. The value that is assigned to histories and autobiographical narratives of oppressed people, whose stories were not deemed worthy of being included in conventional histories, is because they provide evidence of values and practices that challenge hegemonic constructions of social worlds. When this happens, however, Scott argues, "questions about the constructed nature of experience, about how subjects are constituted as different in the first place, about how one's vision is structured –about language (or discourse) and history– are left aside" (Scott 1991, 777). The evidence of experience, when it takes meaning as transparent, reproduces hegemonic ideas about the ahistorical nature of identities, of institutions, of categories of representation and ways of making sense of experience (ibid., 778-779). The realistic style of Bechdel's drawings invites the reader to approach her subject matter as reliable evidence of what she has been through. And yet, Bechdel has more than one way to warn the reader to be critical of the unquestioning acceptance of the reality she presents. She does it by questioning whether her experience is real (the "epistemological crisis" I talk about in the previous chapter) and by being self-deprecating: expressing the fear that her experiences do not concern anyone, or, worse, that with her meticulously planned style of drawing and writing, she edits what a more spontaneous version of herself would write.

There is, however, Scott argues, another approach to experience: not experience as the origins of knowledge, which needs to be made visible, but experience as that which needs to be explained. Not experience as an unmediated witnessing of a fact, but experience as a relation between an event or sense and its interpretation, a relation which has historical origins and which can change (ibid., 781-782). Literature can relativize such relations between senses and their interpretations, thus exposing the processes through which categories of analysis, subjects and their positions are constructed (ibid., 791). This brings me back to Rancière's argument that the political power of art and literature lies in its ability to create a dissensus, a conflict between a sensory display and its interpretation, which invents new ways of making sense of senses, and therefore of framing a specific sphere of experience differently.

With the rest of the present chapter, I want to show not only how Bechdel uses Winnicott's psychoanalysis to qualify the political value of her act of making experiences visible, but also how a diffractive reading of Bechdel and Rich enables a deconstruction of the present relations between senses and meaning and an invention of new relations between them.

On being compliant

In the previous chapter, I discussed a paradox that lies at the heart of *Are You My Mother?*: Bechdel hopes that writing this memoir will enable her to bridge the gap between her isolated mind and the world of experience, whereas, at the same time, she fears that the book will prove to be the contrary, just another projection of her mental apparatus, the same mental apparatus that cuts itself from the world by pretending to be part of it. In Winnicott's terms, the false self that can act the way the true self would act, thus enabling the true self to remain hidden or undeveloped. In this chapter I do a reading of Bechdel that focuses on another topic: the political value of her work. Bechdel also expresses contradictory feelings about this topic, and she uses, again, Winnicottian terms to express them. In these terms, the topic of politics turns into a discussion of the tendencies a subject shows towards compliance and disobedience. Bechdel hopes that writing this book is an act of disobedience, and yet she fears that, on some level, it only gives the impression of being that in order to cover up a deep-seated compliance. The meaning Winnicott assigns to the terms compliance and disobedience will be explained later. They do not immediately translate into a subject's political disposition. The association between these terms and Bechdel's mixed feelings towards the political value of her work lies in Bechdel's interpretation of them. In this section I will show how under the influence of Winnicott, Bechdel is dissatisfied with the relative lack of political power in her work, and explain what is missing in her writing and drawing that would make her work qualify as political in her own eyes. In the next section, I will show how reading Bechdel together with Rich brings about the political power that Bechdel feels her work is lacking.

Bechdel speaks of her lesbianism and her refusal to be closeted as things that have political importance because they have prevented her from being fully compliant (Bechdel 2012, 188). She does not specify what she would be compliant with if it were not for her sexuality, but judging from her focus on family dynamics and her relationship with her mother, I assume she means compliant with what her family wanted of her and therefore with the forces of society that her family represents: social conservatism and homophobia, for example. Struggling against her mother's urges to make cartoons about something other than lesbians, or to stop writing about herself, Bechdel refers to Rich in order to argue that her work is legitimate because it is part of a long lesbian feminist tradition of writing of the self. For example, just a few pages after drawing a conversation with her mother, in which the latter expresses her disapproval of the lesbian theme of Bechdel's work, Bechdel draws a lecture by Rich, which she attended at the early phase of her career (Bechdel 2012, 186) (see figure 11). This is no coincidence: in the lecture the poet explains how adopting a personal voice informed by sexual politics means evolving as a poet. She also warns her audience, by way of her example, of the harsh criticism they should expect if they venture to do the same. Bechdel uses Rich to pre-empty her mother's and her own internalized critical voice: "the self has no place in good writing" (ibid., 200). The stylistics of the page of the lecture are very interesting: a wide shot of the enormous lecture hall full of people with Rich at the end on a podium is juxtaposed with a close up of Alison's hand and pen making notes during the lecture, a small panel depicting Alison fully engrossed in the note-taking business and a tiny panel that depicts Bechdel at a later age going through a volume of Rich's essays, looking for a line from the lecture she cannot find anymore: "The moment when a feeling enters the body is political". Rich is presented as a reverenced authority, and Bechdel as a desperate stakeholder who finds in the lecture something of life-saving importance.

Whether Bechdel can take full advantage of the wisdom imparted by this quote is doubtful. Her awareness of the tradition Rich represents, and the intellectual arguments that she uses to persuade herself and her readers of the political relevance of her work, do not exactly sink in. The problem, in my reading, is precisely this: she uses intellectual arguments, when she should be making art that is *experienced* and

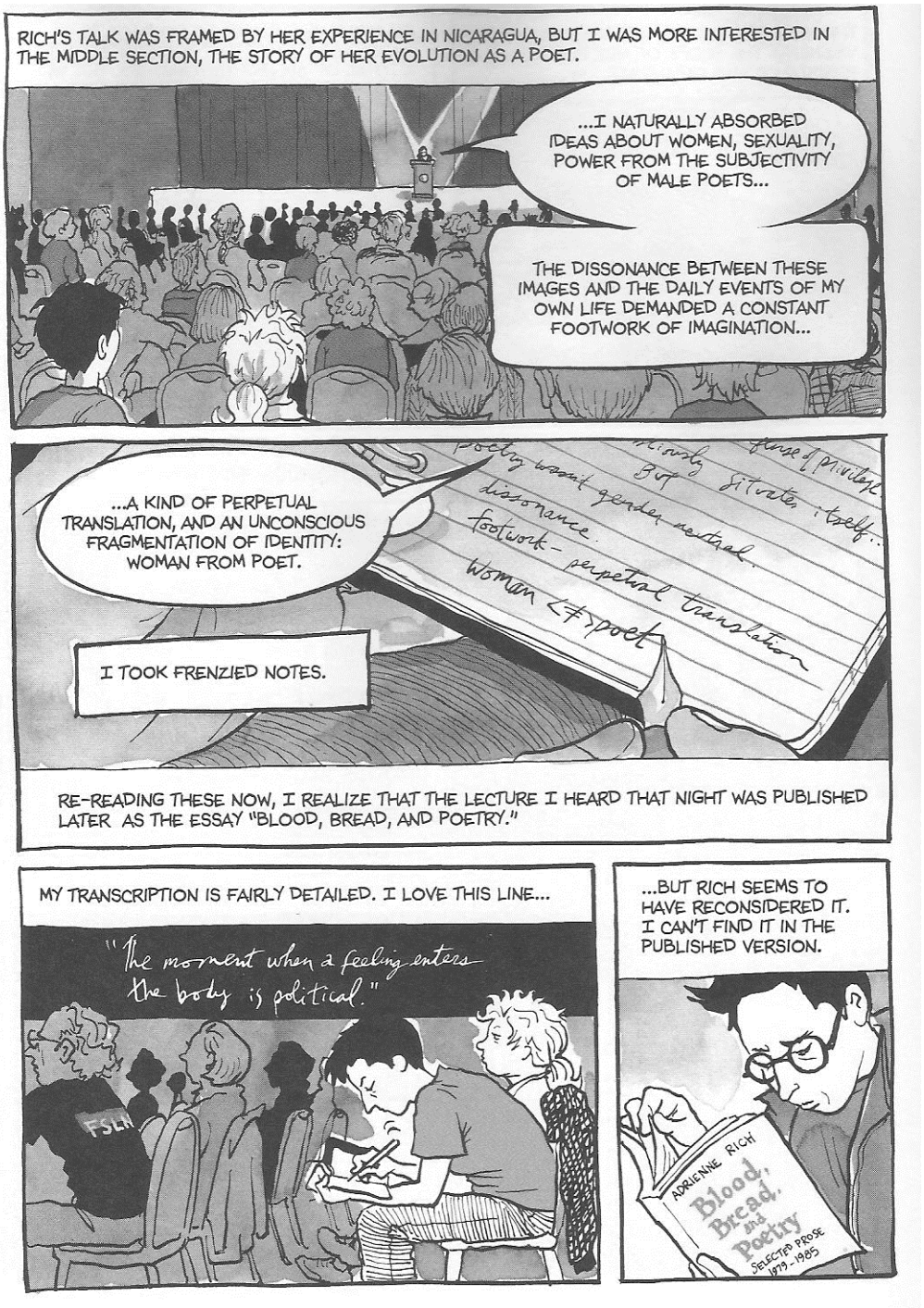

Figure 11. Rich is giving a lecture in a packed room. Bechdel takes "frenzied notes". From Alison Bechdel's *Are You My Mother?*, 186 (Copyright © 2012 by Alison Bechdel.)

felt as political.[10] The politics in her memoir, similarly to her earlier work, seem to be restricted to the intellectual level. The explanation of this is to be found, again, in her

[10] How this can be done will be explained later.

favourite psychoanalyst. The Winnicottian concepts of the true and the false self shape Bechdel's understanding of herself as a political being in the same way we see them shape her epistemology in the previous chapter, for she uses these concepts to explain political compliance and disobedience. In the previous chapter, we see that the notion of the false self is associated with an over-reliance on the intellectual faculty, which results in a feeling of disassociation between the mind and psychosomatic existence, and a feeling of distance from the outside world. The combination of a strong mind with an early need of the child for a false self that takes over the caring role that the mother is not able to successfully fulfil is very unfortunate according to Winnicott: a person that has both can go through life having a feeling that they have never really started to exist (Winnicott 1965, 144). In this chapter we see that Winnicott's false self is also associated with compliance, as opposed to the true self, which is related to a spontaneity that enables the subject to be disobedient to parental and societal expectations.

As we have already seen, both the true and the false self originate in the stage of first object-relationships, when the infant is not fully integrated (ibid., 145), that is, she does not possess an already formed ego that can take care of id-demands, she cannot distinguish between external and internal experiences, such as a thunder clap or an instinct (ibid., 141), and she meets the world with a sense of omnipotence: she believes she creates what she finds (ibid, 145). At this stage there is a potential true self that is expressed in the infant's spontaneous gestures. A good-enough caretaker repeatedly meets these gestures and makes sense of them in a way that does not clash with the infant's sense of omnipotence. The infant then retains her spontaneity and can gradually let go of the illusory element of omnipotence without trauma by recognizing it as illusory and enjoying it as play (ibid. 146). A not-good-enough caretaker ignores these gestures and "instead she substitutes her own gesture which is to be given sense by the compliance of the infant. This compliance of the infant is the earliest stage of the False Self" (ibid. 145). Spontaneity, then, if not completely lost, remains hidden by the false self, whose role is to hide and protect the true self by means of complying with the demands the environment has of the child (ibid., 147).

Winnicott, as Bechdel tells us, associates compliant behaviour with the false self and considers disobedience, or delinquency, a sign of health, a sign that her spontaneity is preserved, something that shows the child is asking for something she used to have

and still needs (Bechdel 2012, 91). But the deeper difference between compliance and its opposite, of which disobedience is an external expression, lies in the subject's way of relating to the environment. Compliance to the environment is not only to act in an expected way, but to relate to the environment as something that cannot change and therefore as something to fit in. There is another way of relating to the environment: participating in the creation of the world by means of negotiating the relationship between internal and external phenomena. Winnicott calls this primary creativity, and it is the origin of the healthy true self who is able to engage in disobedient acts. Indeed, to be able to relate to the world this way is itself an act of disobedience (Winnicott 2005, 15). I wish to draw a parallel here between Winnicott and Rancière, and argue that the creative apperception towards external reality, which the former describes, and which he has argued can find expression in art, resonates with Rancière's notion of art's political power, dissensus. Their similarity lies in that they both view art, creating it and appreciating it, as able to affect changes in the relationship between perceptions of external phenomena and inner psychic realities, and they both see this ability as a way of reconfiguring the world. I want to argue, therefore, that if Bechdel's memoir can be shown to create a feeling of dissensus in the reader, she is in practice shown to engage in the form of primary creativity that Winnicott associates with the true self's non-compliance.

Bechdel takes Winnicott's cue and sets out to find out to what extent she is compliant or disobedient. With regards to her work as a cartoonist she finds much evidence that could support either case. On the one hand, she talks about writing as a way of becoming a subject (Bechdel 2012, 171), and she argues that being a subject is an act of aggression (ibid., 258). She contemplates the loyalties and disloyalties of writing about personal things, and she tries to smooth her own feelings after a disagreement with her mother on that subject using, again, Winnicott: "one can see that these disloyalties, as I am calling them, are an essential feature of living, and they stem from the fact that it is disloyal to everything that is not oneself if one is to be oneself" (Winnicott quoted in Bechdel 2012, 200-201) (see figure 12). She clearly sees potential in becoming a subject, or expressing her true self, through this memoir. Throughout the book, Bechdel suggests that she is aware that her choice to write about personal things and expose family secrets to the public is an act of disobedience, and expresses a sense of guilt for it. At some point in the process of

writing her first memoir, she has an accident that scratches the cornea of her eye. She interprets this as some sort of self-induced punishment for "seeing the truth" about her family (ibid., 65). When she sends a draft of that first book to her mother and her mother replies that it feels like her daughter is wrecking her life, then she lies on the floor, as if she were ill and unable to move, and refuses her girlfriend's caresses, because she "do[es]n't deserve to be touched" (ibid., 165). For sure, her mother reminds her very often that, whether she is drawing cartoons about lesbians or exposing family secrets, Bechdel is hurting her mother and the rest of her family (ibid., 66-67, 181-182, 227-229, 283-284).

On the other hand, with the over-intellectualization of her style, she falls short of that. Bechdel sees her writing (and her therapist agrees with her) as something that is performed by the false self, both as a child who writes the diary (ibid., 151), and as an adult who cannot write spontaneously and must follow a meticulous plan (ibid., 251-252). The kind of drawing she does, her therapist believes, protects her "spontaneous, pure drawing" by keeping it secret so that it is not vulnerable to criticism (ibid.). Bechdel depicts herself, in a series of panels that alternate scenes from another therapy session with snapshots of highlighted pages of Winnicott's books, in a moment of realization. The young Alison sitting in front of her therapist recognizes that she uses her cartoons to get attention because she is desperate for it, but when she gets the attention, she does not feel that she deserves it. Instead she feels "unworthy", a "fraud" (ibid., 106). The highlighted excerpts from Winnicott's books suggest that behind her work lies the combination of a false self with a fine intellect: a false self that can use creativity to pretend it is the true one (ibid.) (see figure 13). One is left to wonder what her drawing style would be like if she expressed her true self with it: would it be less intellectual and more expressive of feeling?

The potential of expressing the non-compliant true self can become a fact if her art expresses creative apperception of external reality as opposed to compliance to the environment. I have suggested earlier that this can be done if Bechdel moves away from the dry intellectualism that characterizes her style. *Are You My Mother?*, however, is not devoid of feeling. Fear and guilt permeate the book, and they have to do with two things. The first is that writing about her family and exposing family secrets to the world is something Bechdel's mother does not like. The book is full of instances where an apprehensive Bechdel prepares to announce her project to her

mother (Bechdel 2012, 6), awaits feedback from her (ibid., 208), feels remorse for causing any pain to her (ibid., 165) or even explains accidents that happen to her as just punishment for her transgression (ibid., 65). Bechdel, in an interview with Thurman, discusses fear as an organizing principle in *Are You My Mother?* What Thurman calls the "heroic emotional daring, the willingness to take big emotional risks" that is woven in the memoir, Bechdel calls an emotional high-wire act during which she tells herself she just has to "start walking out here and see what happens" (Bechdel and Thurman 2014, 25'25-27'17). The second origin of the fear can be traced back to her childhood. There are moments, mostly in therapy sessions, when it

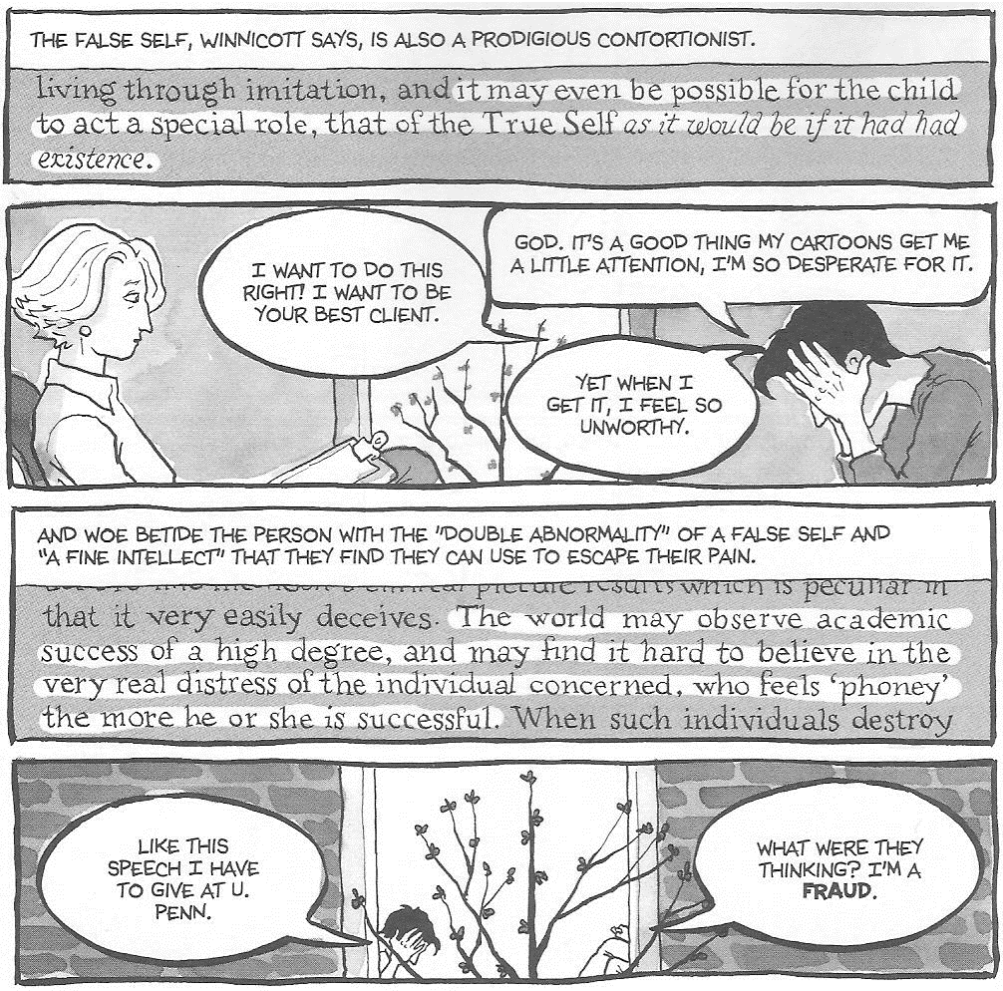

Figure 13. Bechdel in young age in her therapist's office: "I'm a fraud". Excerpts from Winnicott's books explain the reason she feels this way: "the double abnormality" of a false self and "a fine intellect". From Alison Bechdel's *Are You My Mother?*, 106 (Copyright © 2012 by Alison Bechdel.)

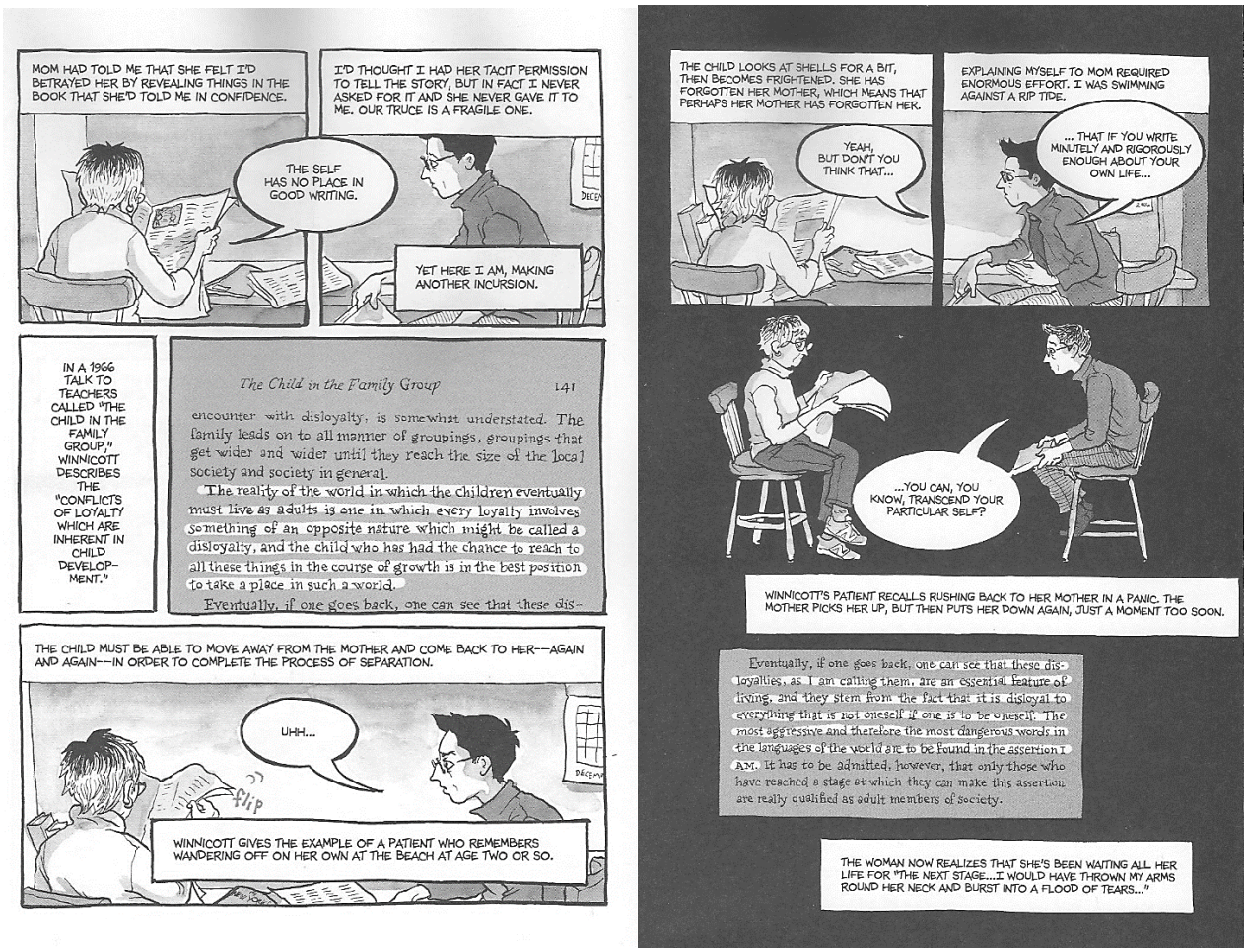

Figure 12. Bechdel, in conversation with her mother, finds it hard to defend herself against her mother's criticism: "The self has no place in good writing". But in voice-over, and with quotes from books, she makes use of Winnicott to argue that she has to do what she has to do: writing about herself is part of the conflict with her mother, which is necessary for her to become a subject. From Alison Bechdel's *Are You My Mother?*, 200-201 (Copyright © 2012 by Alison Bechdel.)

is suggested that her family home was not a safe place for little Alison to grow up because of artistic competition between her parents and the children, and because of her parents' unmetabolized fear and aggression (Bechdel 2012, 71-72).

This fear is talked about but never drawn, except in the dreams she narrates at the beginning of each chapter. In these dreams there is a graphic intensity and depth of feeling that is missing from the memoir's usual tone. In them I find the possibility of an effect on the reader that approaches Rancière's notion of art's political efficacy. In

them I also see a kind of creative ability that noncompliant people have to transform the world around them. In the following section I do a close reading of one of these dreams together with a poem by Adrienne Rich that expresses similar fears.

Roof walking

Long before Rancière developed his theory of the political efficacy of literature, and in the same year Winnicott's theory of the origin and meaning of creativity was published, Adrienne Rich wrote an essay called "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision" (1979). Written in 1972, a time of spreading feminist awakening, the essay describes a realization of the connections between sexual lives and political institutions, which is collective and marks the beginning of a formation of a new consciousness. Literature and literary criticism has an important role to play at this historical moment. Rich argues for the necessity of a feminist literary criticism that is re-vision: the act of looking back with fresh eyes on old texts, "to know the writing of the past, and to know it differently than we have known it" (1979, 35). The necessity of re-vision is justified because, from the point of view of feminist critique, Rich tells us, the work of literature shows us

> how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us, how the very act of naming has been till now a male prerogative, and how we can begin to see and name –and therefore live– afresh. (Rich 1979, 35)

In short, literature is a clue to what constitutes us as subjects and what constitutes the field in which we can act, "the assumptions in which we are drenched" (ibid.), which is the foundation of politics. It is not only a clue to them, but also a way of revising them.

Although Rich belongs to a feminist generation that has no aversion to the mimetic tradition of literary criticism, I see in Rich's text a relation between politics and literature that bares similarities with Rancière's. Rancière's politics is never outside literature because even in the "real world" the real is a matter of construction in the sense that it is a number of configurations of the sensory field and our positions in it.

The configurations can change, and do change when certain fictions produce a dissensus that "undoes, and then re-articulates, connections between signs and images, images and times, and signs and spaces, framing a given sense of reality, a given 'commonsense'" (Rancière 2010, 149). Art and literature can invent new connections between our perceptions and the field of the real, that is, the visible, the sayable and the doable. Rich's idea of literature's political power is also more than descriptive: for her too writers are capable of leading the way in processes that reconfigure the world. Rich describes writers as explorers in unknown territory:

> For writers, and at this moment for women writers in particular, there is the challenge and promise of a whole new psychic geography to be explored. But there is also a difficult and dangerous walking on the ice, as we try to find language and images for a consciousness we are just coming into, and with little in the past to support us. (Rich 1979, 35)

What Rancière calls dissensus, the "conflict between a sensory presentation and a way of making sense of it" (Rancière 2010, 139) that departs from the sensory self-evidence of an order perceived till this point as natural, Rich describes as sailing in uncharted waters, where what was can no longer be, but what is to come is not yet formed. The "natural" order, which assigns individuals and groups to certain places in a system of rule, of separation of public and private, of certain ways of being and doing, of certain understandings of time and space, exists no more, and this is because of an aesthetic suspension of the relationship between experience and feeling. But this means that the old tools we had for creating meaning and for making sense are of no use to us. Where Rancière celebrates an art whose political power lies in that it "questions its own limits and powers, [and it] refuses to anticipate its own effects" (Ranciere 2010, 149), Rich focuses on the person of the poet, who undertakes the work of questioning the world as she knows it without being able to predict the form of the world that her poetry invites into being. She does this beautifully in her poem "The Roofwalker".

> The Roofwalker
>
> –for Denise Levertov
>
> Over the half-finished houses
> night comes. The builders

stand on the roof. It is
quiet after the hammers,
the pulleys hang slack.
Giants, the roofwalkers,
on a listing deck, the wave
of darkness about to break
on their heads. The sky
is a torn sail where figures
pass magnified, shadows
on a burning deck.

I feel like them up there:
exposed, larger than life,
and due to break my neck.

Was it worth while to lay–
with infinite exertion–
a roof I can't live under?
–All those blueprints,
closings of gaps
measurings, calculations?
A life I didn't choose
chose me: even
my tools are the wrong ones
for what I have to do.
I'm naked, ignorant,
a naked man fleeing
across the roofs
who could with a shade of difference
be sitting in the lamplight
against the cream wallpaper
reading –not with indifference–
about a naked man
fleeing across the roofs.

(Rich 1984, 49)

In my reading, "The Roofwalker" is *about* a certain part of the politics of writing: the part that concerns the poet, the obstacles she has to face, and the fears she has to overcome, in her move away from "universal" poetry and towards a personally and politically informed one. But the poem is also *doing* politics in Ranciere's sense of the word. It lets me, the reader, experience a moment of dissensus when the image of familiar scenes is accompanied by a weird feeling of unfamiliarity.

The man on the roof is the poet. Rich expresses the fear of the disorienting but heroic moment when a poet balances precariously between the known and the unknown and feels awe for what is to come while feeling inadequate to the task. Having spent time making fine poetry that receives positive reviews, working on poetic techniques and styles long established and accepted, and cultivating an impersonal dispassionate voice according to the ideal she was raised to look up to, she suddenly finds herself feeling that she has not chosen, but has been chosen by a certain poetic life: the language, style, poetic techniques, voice and subject matter available to her. She talks of a need to change her poetic tools, she can envision a new kind of poetry, but it does not exist yet, and thus she has no tools. She is naked and ignorant. She is high above the ground, exposed, in danger. The safety of traditional poetry's structures, techniques and themes, shown as the familiar landscape of suburban America in the making, gives way to the image of a ship in the middle of an ocean with a wave of darkness about to fall on it. But there is a heroic element in the poem, too. The roofwalker is a giant, bigger than life: a hero. And Rich seems to prefer the roofwalker's fate than the fate of someone who sits comfortably in a room under one of those roofs, when completed, reading in the lamplight about the other people taking risks.

The question of whether one ought to embrace change with the risks it entails or passively observe others who take risks from a position of safety is the keynote of the volume the poem is part of: *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*, published in 1963 (McDaniel 2002, 7). It is the third volume of poetry Rich published and the first one informed by conscious sexual politics (Rich 1986, 180). The style and attitude is different from her previous volumes, as the poet's life as a wife and mother has persuaded her that she needs to write from a particular point of view, rather than from the "universal" one she had aspired until this moment. For this, she has received the

negative criticism she talks about in the lecture Bechdel attends in her memoir: the volume is too bitter, too personal.

But the power of the poem lies in what it makes me experience when I read it. Before I move to a description of my experience, it is important to explain why reading Rich's poem and Bechdel's dream separately, in the sense that in the spatial temporality of the text I am writing I first do a close reading of the one and then the other, does not mean moving away from my diffractive methodology. Even though I do not clearly visualize a coming-together of the works and me or weave a text in which the works merge, or in which excerpts from the one are placed next to excerpts from the other, the fact is that my reading of the one text informs my reading of the other, and the order in which I read them is irrelevant. This is because there is no way of knowing whether having read Bechdel's dream makes me read Rich's poem the way I do: as a poem that primarily discusses the poet's struggle against poetic traditions and techniques that do not fit the poetry she envisions doing as a woman poet (where other readers have seen a fight against the traditional female role of the housewife and mother (Keyes 1986, 64-65). Or whether having read Rich's poem makes me see Bechdel's dream in the way I will describe shortly afterwards. The knowledge and the experience of the works this diffractive reading has produced would not be the same if I read one of them together with other texts or simply separate from each other.

What happens as I envision the builders on the roof, having just finished their day's work, their muscles slack like the pulleys, resting but still standing, looking over the unfinished roofs towards the darkness that descends, is that I see the darkness too, and the darkness changes. It is not night coming but a lack of meaning or a change of meaning about to break on our heads. There is a feeling of anticipation, for what looked like the end of a day's work in the first three lines of the poem, feels now like the beginning of something, yet of what exactly is still unknown. The descending darkness carries a violent bundle of meaning ("a torn sail where figures pass magnified"), which is still senseless, because it is still purposeless. It transforms the bodies of the builders, into different bodies that do not fulfil their proper function but set forth to fulfil another, emerging and non-yet-specified one. As the roofwalker's skilled, dexterous body participates in a choreography that leads it towards incompetence, so the houses over which he flees undergo a similar transformation that

deprives them of their telos. The very unrepresentability of the change that the roofwalker and roofs go through requires that I, as the reader, do the "footwork of imagination" that Rich had to do when she was confronted with the fragmentation of identity that came with being two contradictory things at once: a woman and a poet (Rich 1986, 175). However, what is at work here is not an identification between the reader and the writer, that allows me to feel like Rich and therefore understand her position, but a crack in the middle of the familiar that allows for the unpredictable to happen. The middle-class suburb and the structures of poetry, the capacities of the bodies of workers and poets are all overturned, not because of a critique that exposes their blind spots or the political, ideological, institutional structures that keep them in place for me to see and understand, but because their reality is qualified by a radical break between sense and meaning. This disassociation requires that I stop and contemplate their previously unexplored possibilities.

In a move that I interpret as similar to that of Rich, Bechdel, at the opening of the chapter entitled "Hate", creates magnificent imagery that visualizes the dangers the author faces while pursuing her artistic expression (Bechdel 2012, 161-163) (see figures 14-15). She narrates a dream she has, in which she has to climb up a precipice of ice of immeasurable height, fearful for her life. But later, when she has managed to reach the top in safety, the ice thaws and the precipice is revealed to be her childhood home. She's standing on the roof realizing that even if she had fallen, she would not have been really hurt, the roof is not that high. It is now a beautiful spring morning, so when she attempts to "convey the extremity" of the situation she was in just shortly ago to her father and a neighbour, they stare in disbelief. The similarities with Rich's poem, in terms of content and imagery, are quite obvious. The three pages of the dream symbolize the artistic struggles Bechdel is facing while writing her memoir – prominent in which is that in order to achieve artistic freedom she has to be disloyal to her family– as well as the psychic dangers she faced as a child in her family home. The symbolism of the dream is quite straightforward. It is a good sample of what Bechdel is good at: investigating childhood and the traumas of everyday life, and talking about the dilemmas of doing autobiography. The dream, however, is different from Bechdel's usual tone when she speaks of the dangers she faced as a child in her family and as an adult artist, because it does not have the self-doubting and self-deprecating attitude that is Bechdel's trademark. Nothing in the dream suggests there

is anything in her experience that may be unreal. That she cannot show her father and the neighbour how dangerous her situation was is unfortunate, but attests to their different perspectives and temporal distances from the event, rather than her own tendency to be overdramatic. The drawing is realistic and the authorial voice in the captions is characterized by a calm matter-of-factness. The message is very clear, much clearer than when Bechdel discusses these things in her therapist's office: to be raised as a girl in a family strained by the burden patriarchal and heteronormative society imposes on it is not safe; to be an artist who wants to tell her story in spite of the social notions of propriety and family honour is not safe.[11] A titanic effort of will is required to save her from either.

However, in my reading of Bechdel I do not want to focus on thematic and visual similarities these three pages have with Rich's poem. Instead I want to emphasize that the transformation of Bechdel's family home into something life-threatening happens in my reading, which is informed by/diffracted with Rich's poem. As Ranciere has said, the political efficacy of art lies in the fact that we cannot anticipate its effects: it is not my intention, therefore, to argue that the effect of the three pages I am describing below happens always, to every reader, in every context, but to explain what happens when they are read together with Rich's poem, by me.

In this reading, the political efficacy of the dream pages, and at the same time Bechdel's ability to creatively affect the world, in the Winnicottian sense, lie in the way these pages change the landscape of the familiar, like Rich does with her poem. These few pages affectively transform the family home into a life-threatening site, through the expression of emotional intensity and a temporal interruption in the spatialisation of narrative.

Graphic narratives register temporality spatially (Chute 2008, 452), since they move forward in time going from one side of the page to another. It requires only the minimum of graphic literacy to be able to follow panel after panel from top to bottom

[11] Bechdel has said that the book would have been different if her mother was not looking over her shoulder. She may not have abandoned the project altogether, but she still has tried to accommodate her mother's needs by editing things out (Bechdel and Thurman 2014, 13'15-13'50).


5
Hate

Figures 14 and 15. The precipice-of-ice dream. From Alison Bechdel's *Are You My Mother?*, 161-163 (Copyright © 2012 by Alison Bechdel.)

and from the left to the right.[12] The three pages of the precipice dream follow this sequence, on a first reading, but the first page causes a disruption to the sequence, because it sets the frame for another reading to take place simultaneously. The second reading does not follow the panels' linearity.

The first page of the dream is an introductory one-page frame showing Bechdel desperately clinging to the ice. It prepares the reader for reading the later pages (which have many panels) as if they were one-panelled also, in a way. In the full-page panel we see Bechdel from above. The effect of the "bleed", when the panel expands to the edges of the page drawing the reader in, together with the close-up on Bechdel's face, which expresses fear, and the perspective that places the reader in a

[12] Or, from top to bottom and right to left if the comic is in a language whose script's direction is from right to left, like with Arabic, Hebrew or Japanese comics.

position from where she might be able to offer help, give the event of reading the first page an intensity that is extraordinary for the opening of a chapter.[13] At the same time, there are no words: the silence, as well as the solitude of the panel, has the effect of removing the panel from any particular span of time (McCloud 2006, 164). There is a stillness that contrasts with the urgency and precariousness of the situation of Bechdel hanging from the precipice and her facial expression. There is a feeling that the event does not take place in a particular moment in time but is there permanently. The intensity allows the effect of the first page to linger in the reading of the last two pages: stillness of time instead of linearity. Fear that lingers over the viewing of the last panels, where the house looks familiar and all danger is gone, where intensity gives way to clarity and distance.

In the light of the first page, the structure of the last two pages invites the reader to not only follow the familiar rhythm of comics, which unfolds the dream from beginning to end, but also to pause and look at the two pages as a simultaneous juxtaposition of the icy precipice and the family home, as if they were an image cut in two, showing some sort of bilateral symmetry. On the left the reader sees Bechdel on the precipice of ice, fighting for her life. On the right Bechdel's family home has replaced the precipice. When the house and the precipice can be looked at simultaneously, what happens is something that happens in dreams and with which we are all familiar: an object can be one thing and at the same time an entirely different thing. Something familiar can be something strange. Something safe can be something dangerous. The different times of the dream being transcribed into pages viewed by me simultaneously means a merging of the precipice and the house. The merging is not done in drawing: we do not have one drawing in which the house and the precipice are the same thing, that is, a drawing that depicts a structure that combines elements found in houses and elements found in precipices. It is not done in the structure of the dream, which follows a temporal mode: first it is a precipice, then it is a house. The merging happens in the structure of the frames and the pages viewed by me, a reader already familiar with the transformation of familiar landscape into dangerous territory, with the idea that roofs are precipices, and people standing on them are heroes

[13] It is more usual in comics to find a fixed, quiet background to set the stage for something dramatic to happen later (McCloud 2006, 50): there is an establishing shot, usually a long-shot panel, which tells the reader where they are, before the story zooms in to the protagonists and the events in the story (McCloud 2006, 160).

fighting against threatening forces for survival. Like in Rich's poem, the middle-class house and the (emotional) work of the artist, their qualities, capacities and purpose are changed because of a radical break between sense and meaning that happens the moment my gaze goes back and forth the two pages seeing the house and the precipice as the same thing simultaneously, refusing to follow the rhythm and linearity that the rules of graphic literacy prescribe. During this diffractive reading event, Bechdel's dream is political because it produces effects of dissensus by turning the familiar image of a home into a dangerous place where the artist is a heroic figure that might meet her death.

Conclusion

Bechdel's early work is political in sense that it shows the effects of power on people, inviting them to change power structures by taking up political struggle. It creates community and networks of readers. *Are You My Mother?* is political in this sense as well, but it is more fundamentally political because it questions its own political nature. Asking whether it is political or not invites the reader to imagine ways of doing politics through art that are yet un-thought of. Bechdel uses Winnicott's psychoanalytic theory to explain why sometimes doing politics may leave someone with a feeling of being a fraud, unless their political actions are accompanied by a certain feeling of spontaneity that enables them to approach the world in a creative way. Art and literature can be employed towards a creative reconfiguration of the world as they can negotiate the space between the objective and the subjective. For Rancière, art does this when it creates an aesthetic rupture, which he calls dissensus: a disassociation between sense and sense, a certain sensory experience and a certain feeling. Dissensus re-configures the experience of the sensible, enabling a reframing of what constitutes the commonly accepted as visible and sayable, of what separates the private from the public, of what is given as the real, in short, of the foundation of the politics that determine processes of subjectification and constitute the common sense of communities.

Bechdel's memoir has the power to create dissensus when, with the help of Rich's poetry in the diffractive reading I do of them together, she moves away from her preoccupation with the politics of representation and her intense intellectualism. Reading a series of frames from Bechdel's memoir that describe a dream she had, in which she climbs an icy precipice that turns out to be her family home, together with a poem by Rich, in which the poet identifies with a builder walking on a roof, creates a break in the way I look at the familiar image of American suburban houses: they are transformed into dangerous territories, while the bodies that inhabit them detach them from their proper function by climbing on them. Bechdel's dream symbolizes the artistic struggles she has regarding writing about personal matters while Rich's dream discusses the terrifying moment when a poet sheds off the poetic tools at her disposal and needs to find new ones. Rich's poem "The Roofwalker" makes me see something I could not see in my independent reading of Bechdel and vice versa: their art enables the emergence of new meanings of the private and of what constitutes artistic work through the feelings that they create in me the moment the familiar images are divorced from familiar meaning. This moment is political.

Conclusion

Bechdel's graphic memoir *Are You My Mother?* invites the reader to read it together with other texts, including Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse*, and Adrienne Rich's "The Roofwalker". She uses other writers as models that show how to practice self-therapeutic writing, or as authority figures that validate her work. In my reading, however, Bechdel uses other texts as transitional objects, which in Winnicottian terms means objects that symbolize the space in between the subjective and the objective, in an attempt to creatively re-stage that period in an infant's life when the foundations of the subject's relation to the world are established. Bechdel wants to revise her relationship with the world, herself and creativity, and she uses an opening up of her text towards other texts in order to achieve that. Treating these texts like transitional objects entails the paradox of seeing them both as texts that she finds, being there as they are, and at the same time as creations of her own mind. The reader is invited to participate in the paradox of the discovery/creation of the other texts.

As a reader who accepts the challenge, I believe that my reading can only do justice to the onto-epistemological presuppositions of this paradox by making diffractive reading my method. Originating in feminist philosophy, diffractive reading enables us to read texts together in a way that transforms them. Treating texts not as fixed prior to the event of their being read together but as objects whose meaning emerges in the moment of their encounter can change our ideas about the knowledge produced in literary reading: it need no longer be *about* the texts but it can be part of the texts' making. Thus, a diffractive reading of Bechdel and Woolf changes both insofar as new meanings emerge in the patterns of their convergence. The same happens in the reading of Bechdel and Rich.

The first chapter of literary reading, "'Subject and Object and the Nature of reality': plexiglass domes and jars on nerves (Bechdel and Woolf's onto-epistemological questions)", focuses on how Bechdel and Woolf's themes and styles brought together deal with certain philosophical questions, namely: "What kinds of knowledge are

there?" and "What is the nature of reality and how can we know it?" Bechdel suffers from an epistemological crisis, which takes the form of a distrust of her own perception. Using Winnicott's psychoanalytic theory, she finds the origin of her complaint in some faulty care-taking in the earliest stages of her life, which has resulted in a denial of dependence, an over-analytical mind that has lost its intimate relationship with the body, and a feeling of being cut off from the world. Bechdel's approach to external reality and to her perception of it changes when brought together, through my diffractive reading, with Woolf's phenomenological approach to knowledge, a knowledge which goes through the body and which entails an ontology of the world that is co-constituted by our sensations. Bechdel read together with Woolf need not contrast the multiplicity of her perceptions with a supposed objective reality, and her relation as subject with the world "out there" need not be one of distant observation, for there is knowledge that is intimacy, and the things themselves are the jar on the nerve of our experience.

The second literary analysis chapter, called "'The moment when a feeling enters the body': politics, compliance and roof walking (Bechdel and Rich's politics of writing)", traces the consequences of Bechdel's erratic upbringing in her compliant attitude toward her mother and the political conservatism that she represents. In practice, Bechdel has created powerful political art for a long time, and her memoir follows her earlier work's footsteps. But Bechdel mistrusts the appearance of being political when it is not accompanied by a feeling of being able to creatively reconfigure the world. With *Are You My Mother?* she questions the political value of her work, accusing herself of narcissism and of hiding a deep-seated compliance behind a dryly intellectual, painstaking drawing and writing style. Using Winnicott's theory again, she believes that truly non-compliant behaviour can be found when a subject is able to creatively renegotiate the psychic space between the objective and the subjective. For Rancière, art can do this through dissensus: a rupture between a sense and the way of making sense of it, which sets forth a process of reconfiguring the foundations of the political. Art is political, for Rancière, because it can break with a given order that assigns bodies, objects, thoughts and feelings to certain realms. Reading Bechdel diffractively with Rich creates the effect of dissensus. Reading, more specifically, a series of panels that describe a dream in which Bechdel climbs a precipice of ice that turns out to be the house she was brought up in, together with a

poem by Rich, in which the poet identifies with a man walking on a roof, creates a feeling of fear. The familiar image of suburban houses creates a feeling of being in unknown, dangerous territory. The two works together allow for a break in the way we associate familiar images with safety, making the reader experience in her body a political moment of realization of the dangers the home can pose to a woman, and a lesbian, artist.

Throughout this thesis, I have tried to follow and be part of Bechdel's endeavour to rework her relationship with the world by reworking her relationship with her mother. I have done this while engaging in my project of looking for a way to read texts together that do not reproduce hierarchies between older canonical texts and more recent, relatively marginal ones. In my diffractive reading of Bechdel with Woolf and Rich, I tried to practice, like Bechdel, an engagement with the past that reinvigorates the present without restricting it.

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