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## The Weeping Woman in the Graphic Memoir: A Derridean Inquiry into the Traces/Trait(s) of “Self”

### Abstract

In this paper, I examine how women graphic memoirists – Marjane Satrapi, Alison Bechdel, and Roz Chast in particular – attempt to draw that which remains fleeting, absent, and abyssal: the so-called “self.” I thus extend Jacques Derrida’s critique of what he has called the “metaphysics of presence” in philosophy to autobiographical comics, a popular medium that is heavily prefigured by his analysis of the self-portrait as a ruin. I believe this endeavor will help fill the gap in studies about the gendered aspects of Derrida’s work *Memoirs of the Blind*, as well as the potential of autobiographical comics to illuminate philosophical issues concerning the self. Finally, through my analysis of women’s graphic narratives, I hope to point to the possibility of a larger project, that of a feminist Derridean critique of sequential art.

### Key words

Jacques Derrida, graphic memoirs, comics, sequential art, *Memoirs of the Blind*, autobiography

### Introduction

In this paper, I would like to bring together two topics whose relationship with each other, to my knowledge, has not yet been sufficiently explored. On one hand, there is the prolific French philosopher Jacques Derrida’s remarks about the act of drawing and the metaphor of blindness, in his book *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*. On the other hand, there is the rich literature of graphic memoirs – life-writing in

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comics form – whose range of themes and artistic styles resonates indeed with Derrida’s (re-)visionary ideas.

Through an analysis of sketches depicting blind subjects, Derrida calls attention to the inherent paradox of drawing. Sight is crucial to the act of drawing; while history is replete with blind musicians, singers, poets, and sculptors, there seem to be hardly any blind draftsmen or draftswomen. Yet drawing itself involves a type of blindness, a destabilization of the privileged relationship between sight and knowledge. For instance, in order to draw someone or something, the artist must turn away from the subject, retracing what had been seen not through direct perception, but through memory.<sup>1</sup>

Although Derrida mainly addressed the works of well-known masters from the Louvre collection, I believe his insights may be extended to the work of three contemporary women graphic memoirists: Marjane Satrapi in *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* (2003) and *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return* (2004), Alison Bechdel in *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2007), and Roz Chast in *Can’t We Talk about Something More Pleasant?* (2014). These poignant works deal with the unspeakable, the traumatic, or the un-representable through the medium of sequential art, to use Will Eisner’s term for what is more popularly known as “comics.” Satrapi tells the story of her cultural exile as a privileged Iranian woman educated in Europe during the height of the Islamist revolution in her home country. Bechdel frames her experience of coming out as a lesbian against the story of her relationship with her closeted gay father, who commits suicide when the author is 20 years old. Lastly, Chast narrates her years of caregiving for her nonagenarian parents, detailing the obstacles they faced as an elderly couple and their drawn-out deaths at a hospice. The emotional impact of these experiences, and the great challenge that these authors must surely have faced in trying to render it in drawing, call to mind Derrida’s insight about the elusive object of the self-portrait, as well as how the self-portraitist or memoirist is transformed into a visionary or seer through the blinding act of weeping.

In this paper, I examine how women graphic memoirists – Satrapi, Bechdel, and Chast in particular – attempt to draw that which remains fleeting, absent, and abyssal: the so-called “self.” I thus extend Derrida’s critique of what he has called the “metaphysics of presence” in philosophy

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<sup>1</sup> J. Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind. The Self-portrait and Other Ruins*, trans. P.-A. Brault and M. Naas, Chicago and London 1993, p. 47.

to autobiographical comics, a popular medium that is heavily prefigured by his analysis of the self-portrait as a ruin. I believe this endeavor will help fill the gap in studies about the gendered aspects of Derrida's *Memoirs of the Blind*, as well as the potential of autobiographical comics to illuminate philosophical issues concerning the self.

## Derrida on blindness and the act of drawing

*Memoirs of the Blind* constitutes Derrida's notes for an exhibition specially commissioned by the Louvre that ran from October 1990 to January 1991. Here he puts forward two hypotheses: first, that drawing itself is blind; and second, that "a drawing of the *blind* is a drawing *of* the blind."<sup>2</sup> The formulation of these hypotheses is in keeping with his signature style of resorting to puns and wordplays, as well as the deliberate conflation of the literal and the figurative, in order to underscore the complexity of meaning. For the Louvre project, he chose to critique a series of sketches of blind subjects, many of which have religious and literary themes, by artists such as Antoine Coypel, Jacques Louis-David, Rembrandt, Peter Paul Rubens, and others.

Derrida's preoccupation with blindness may be seen as part of his project of questioning Western philosophy's traditional association between seeing and knowing, encapsulated in the Greek concept of the *eidōs* or the idea. This association runs clearly through Plato's allegory of the cave, in which knowledge is understood as a journey of enlightenment, of leaving behind shadow images in order to see things as they really are. The sun simultaneously symbolizes the cause of sight and the eye itself. In Plato's genealogy, the sensible sun is related to the intelligible sun (i.e. the Good) in the way that "the son is related to the father who has begotten him in his own likeness."<sup>3</sup> (This invocation of masculinity is of a piece with the Derridean diagnosis of philosophy as phallogocentric, i.e. as being biased for both masculinity and rationality.)<sup>4</sup>

According to Plato's theory of forms, reality as such inheres in an otherworldly realm of the perfect Forms of being, which the soul has full

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<sup>2</sup> Ibidem, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem, p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> For the main sources for Derrida's philosophy of deconstruction, see *Of Grammatology*, *Writing and Difference*, and *Speech and Phenomena*, all published in 1967.

access to via reason. This idea is only one example of the metaphysics of presence<sup>5</sup> that Derrida rejects. For him, being can never be fully present or pinned down due to the work of *différance*. This French word refers simultaneously to how meaning arises from (1) the differences between signs, and (2) the perpetual deferment of a final form. Derrida's anti-metaphysical stance thus leads to a radically new way of thinking about presence, identity, subject, and other key concepts.<sup>6</sup> His philosophy emphasizes becoming over being, change over constancy, the event over the non-temporal structure, and difference over identity.<sup>7</sup> His project is no less than the attempt to think the unthinkable, to say the unsayable: the absence of Being or its trace/trait.<sup>8</sup>

We see now why Derrida chose blindness as an analogy for the act of drawing, since for him it is a doomed attempt to depict anything in concrete form. *Memoirs of the Blind* begins with the observation that blind persons are usually drawn with their hands outstretched. "If to draw a blind man is first of all to show hands, it is in order to draw attention to *what one draws with the help of that which one draws.*"<sup>9</sup> Compare this with the prisoners in Plato's allegory of the cave, who are represented as motionless:

Never do they stretch out their hands toward the shadow (*skia*) or the light (*phós*), towards the silhouettes or images that are drawn on the wall. Unlike Coppel's solitary man, they do not venture out with outstretched hands in the direction of this *skia*- or *photo*-graphy, their sights set on this shadow- or light-writing. They converse, they speak of memory. Plato imagines them seated, chained, able to address one another, to "dialectize," to lose themselves in the echoing of voices.<sup>10</sup>

Against the logocentric idea that drawing records or gives form to that which is fully available to the gaze, Derrida writes that the draftsman or

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<sup>5</sup> This may be understood in several ways: (1) presence as *eidos* or form (Plato), (2) presence as substance, essence, or existence (Aristotle), (3) self-presence as the Cogito (Descartes), and (4) presence as transcendental consciousness (phenomenology) (T. Baldwin, "Presence, Truth, and Authenticity", [in:] *Derrida's Legacies. Literature and Philosophy*, eds. S. Glendinning, R. Eaglestone, London and New York 2008, p. 108).

<sup>6</sup> Royle N., *Jacques Derrida*, London and New York 2003, p. 79.

<sup>7</sup> Stocker B., *Derrida on Deconstruction*, London and New York 2006, p. 30.

<sup>8</sup> For Derrida, the trait or drawing, as will be explained shortly, constantly takes leave of itself, appearing only as the absence of itself.

<sup>9</sup> J. Derrida, *op. cit.*, pp. 4–5.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 15.

draftswoman actually mimics the gesture of a blind person.<sup>11</sup> In the execution of his or her art, he or she does not see. Derrida explains this in terms of the three aspects of the “powerlessness for the eye” in the act of drawing.

The first aspect concerns the “aperspective of the graphic act,” whereby there remains a gap or abyss between the thing drawn and the drawing, or the object and its representation, which has the potential to “haunt the visible at its very possibility.”<sup>12</sup> In his discussion of mnemonic art, Baudelaire refers to the artist’s reliance on memory at the moment he turns away from his model and toward the surface of the canvas. He “breaks with the present of visual perception in order to keep a better eye on the drawing.”<sup>13</sup> This, and in reference to Merleau-Ponty’s last work, *The Visible and the Invisible*,<sup>14</sup> asserts the paradox that visibility itself involves a non-visibility.

The second aspect is the withdrawal or the eclipse of the trait.<sup>15</sup> In the English translation of Derrida, the French word “trait,” which literally means “line,” has been preserved. For Derrida, nothing belongs to the trait or the drawing, which joins and adjoins only by separating. The drawing is the linear limit, an ellipsis that is neither ideal nor intelligible: “The outline or tracing separates and separates itself; it retraces only borderlines, intervals, a spacing grid with no possible appropriation.”<sup>16</sup> (In the abstract terms of geometry, for instance, the line – which is infinitely thin – occupies no space, yet makes visible the figures *of* space.)

Finally, the third aspect refers to the rhetoric of the trait, which involves the seeming dependence of the meaning of the drawing on words or speech. Verbal language imposes itself on the drawing, which rarely goes without articulation, order, or name.<sup>17</sup> This phenomenon is especially evident in the self-portrait, a genre that reveals the paradox of spectatorship. For the viewer to interpret a portrait as an illustration by the artist of himself or herself, a label must indicate it to be so. The title announcing a work as a self-portrait thereby has a “juridical effect” that calls for a witness (here Derrida makes a comparison to the memoir genre, which features the reverberation of several voices). On the other hand,

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<sup>11</sup> Ibidem, p. 43.

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem, p. 44.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, p. 47.

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem, p. 49.

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem, p. 53.

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem, p. 54.

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem, p. 57.

despite the crucial role of the inscription or label to meaning-generation, it is still “a verbal event that does not belong to the inside of the work but only to its parergonal border.”<sup>18</sup>

Derrida’s discussion of Henri Fantin-Latour’s self-portraits is key in my application of his ideas to the graphic memoir. Derrida pays special attention to the different processes of looking involved in the making and viewing of a self-portrait. To emphasize the conjectural nature of these processes, he refers to the hypothesis of sight (i.e. that the drawing of an object implies a spectator) and the hypothesis of intuition (i.e. that the self-portrait could only have been generated through the use of a mirror.)<sup>19</sup> Of Fantin-Latour, Derrida writes, “it is only *by hypothesis* that we imagined him in the process of drawing himself facing a mirror, and thus doing the self-portrait of the draftsman doing the self-portrait of the draftsman.”<sup>20</sup> Despite the apparently solipsistic nature of this act, however, the existence of the other inhabits the very vision of the self-portrait (or shall we say, to use contemporary parlance, the *selfie*). This is because in looking at the mirror, the draftsman occupies the space we occupy, necessarily creating a “self-portrait of a self-portrait only for the other.”<sup>21</sup> It is the spectator who ultimately produces the specularity; we are made blind to the mirror or we become the mirror. This also blinds the subject via what Derrida calls the law of blinding reflexivity, according to which the artist’s eyes are replaced with those of the spectator.<sup>22</sup> The draftsman no longer sees himself, but the spectator looking at him.

Aside from the centrality of the other-spectator in the self-portrait, Derrida’s analysis also excavates its status as a *ruin*. The word “ruin” ordinarily connotes the remnants of something that was historically whole or complete, but is no longer. Subverting this traditional understanding, Derrida<sup>23</sup> asserts that the ruin does not come after the work, but is produced as such, without the promise of restoration: “In the beginning there is ruin.”<sup>24</sup> The self-portrait is a ruin on the level of the act of creation:

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<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, p. 64.

<sup>19</sup> Or, we might add, some other means of visually presenting one’s own image to oneself, such as a photograph.

<sup>20</sup> J. Derrida, op. cit., p. 60.

<sup>21</sup> Ibidem, p. 62.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>23</sup> Ibidem, p. 65.

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem, p. 68.

As soon as the draftsman considers himself, fascinated, fixed on the image, yet disappearing before his own eyes into the abyss, the movement by which he tries desperately to recapture himself is already, in its very present, an act of memory.<sup>25</sup>

Simultaneously, the self-portrait is also a ruin on the level of the act of viewing: "Ruin is the self-portrait, this face looked at in the face as the memory of itself, what *remains* or *returns* as a specter from the moment one first looks at oneself and a figuration is eclipsed."<sup>26</sup> Any depiction of oneself by oneself – whether in verbal or visual form – is never the present thing, but merely our memory of it. It is never the (un-representable) originary whole, but always and already the ruin. The ruin encapsulates the "temporal dislocation at the heart of self-portraiture."<sup>27</sup>

In the last part of *Memoirs of the Blind*, Derrida compares the self-portrait to the memoir, reading Augustine's *Confessions* and Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo* as "books of tears." Both these texts associate the vision of the seer with the inward gaze, which in turn is inspired by an experience that causes one to weep. In the case of Augustine, it was the deaths of his friend and mother. In the case of Nietzsche, it was that pivotal moment in Turin when he witnessed a horse being whipped, after which he suffered a mental breakdown. Thus, Derrida connects grief or mourning to truth, making the positive claim that what is proper to the human eye is not sight *per se* but tears. Compared to other animals, we are the only ones who know how to weep. True vision is located in and through tears: "For at the very moment they veil sight, they would unveil what is proper to the eye."<sup>28</sup> These observations are clearly germane to the graphic memoir, which attempts to illustrate the traumatic or abyssal experiences in a kind of blind draftsman's or draftwoman's vision of the elusive self.

## Sequential art and autobiographical narratives

The graphic memoir is but one genre in the vast literature of comics. In a landmark study of this medium, pioneering comics artist Will Eisner – who is credited for the first "graphic novel"<sup>29</sup> – defines it simply as sequential art:

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>26</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>27</sup> F. Johnstone, "Mark Morrisroe's Self-portraits and Jacques Derrida's 'Ruin'", *Third Text*, 2011, XXV, 6, p. 802.

<sup>28</sup> J. Derrida, op. cit., p. 126.

<sup>29</sup> *The Contract with God* series, collected as a trilogy 2005.

The format of the comic book presents a montage of both word and image, and the reader is thus required to exercise both visual and verbal interpretative skills. [...] In the most economical state, comics employ a series of repetitive images and recognizable symbols. When these are used again and again to convey similar ideas, they become a language – a literary form, if you will. And it is this disciplined application that creates the ‘grammar’ of Sequential Art.<sup>30</sup>

McCloud on the other hand offers a longer definition of comics as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer.”<sup>31</sup> The use of sequential art to tell epic narratives can be dated back to the pre-Columbian era, as evidenced by a picture manuscript discovered in Mexico by Hernán Cortés in 1519.<sup>32</sup> Even before the invention of the printing press, which transformed comics into the form we know today, it had pre-modern precursors: for example, the Beayeux tapestry, which depicts the Norman conquest of England from 1066 onwards, and Egyptian hieroglyphics and paintings.<sup>33</sup> Even individual letters had started out as pictorial images.<sup>34</sup>

What makes comics a distinct art form is how it combines verbal and visual elements in a more integrated way than do illustrated books or picture books.<sup>35</sup> Special attention to the interaction between words and images, which constitutes a new literary language, is key to understanding comics.<sup>36</sup> Viewed in this way, comics can be a site of subversion in regard to the rhetoric of the trait, as described by Derrida. If the verbal inscription dictates the meaning of a self-portrait, the medium of sequential art on the other hand assigns equally crucial roles to images and words. Ignoring one element would lead to misunderstanding or misinterpretation.<sup>37</sup> In short, in comics there is no opposition or hierarchy between the verbal and the visual.

Another point of intersection between the medium of sequential art and Derrida’s analysis of the trait concerns the interaction between two key comics elements: the panel and the gutter. Eisner compares the comics

<sup>30</sup> W. Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, Florida 1985, p. 8.

<sup>31</sup> S. McCloud, *Understanding Comics. The Invisible Art*, New York 1993, p. 9.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 10.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 12–15.

<sup>34</sup> W. Eisner, *op. cit.*, p. 14–15.

<sup>35</sup> M. Bongco, *Reading Comics. Language, Culture, and the Concept of the Superhero in Comic Books*, New York and London 2000, p. 46.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 49.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 55–56.



panel to a movie frame, or a theater stage; it is where the action takes place.<sup>38</sup> A crucial difference is that panels do not move by themselves in the way that movie or theater scenes do, thereby holding the eye captive. In comics the reader's eye has more freedom of movement, which the artist has to control through artful panel sequencing. Moreover, the static nature of the images in comics demands more imaginative and interpretative work on the reader, work that takes place at the site of the gutter or the blank spaces separating the panels. For the story to make sense, the reader has to imagine what takes place between and outside the visible frames, events that are not depicted although they are implied. The medium of comics therefore underscores the significant role played by the absent present (or the presence of absence), which Derrida describes in terms of "the differential inappearance of the trait."<sup>39</sup>

To return to the history of sequential art, what Mitchell calls the "pictorial turn"<sup>40</sup> in the human sciences and culture has led to what we may think of as comics' golden age. Given the current state of contemporary media, Varnum and Gibbons note that the balance of power between words and images may very well have already swung to images.<sup>41</sup> The last century has placed a new premium on visual literacy; "many theorists [are] now arguing that the apparent transparency of pictures is often illusory and that they require specific reading skills."<sup>42</sup> This partly explains the robust scholarly activity currently enjoyed by the rapidly emerging field of comics studies.<sup>43</sup> This is unprecedented in that graphic narratives had not always been perceived as serious works. Groensteen enumerates four reasons for this negative bias against comics: its formal hybridity, the

<sup>38</sup> W. Eisner, op. cit., p. 40.

<sup>39</sup> J. Derrida, op. cit., p. 54.

<sup>40</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, "The Pictorial Turn", [in:] idem, *Picture Theory. Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, Chicago 1994, p. 11.

<sup>41</sup> R. Varnum, Ch. T. Gibbons, "Introduction", [in:] *The Language of Comics*, eds. R. Varnum, Ch. T. Gibbons, Mississippi 2001, p. ix.

<sup>42</sup> E. El Razaie, *Autobiographical Comics. Life Writing in Pictures*, Jackson Mississippi 2012, p. 36.

<sup>43</sup> Various anthologies, journals, conferences, and academic courses continue to be devoted to the study of comics. See: M. Smith, R. Duncan, "Introduction", [in:] *Critical Approaches to Comics: Theories and Methods*, eds. M. Smith, R. Duncan, London and New York 2012; A. Ndalians, "Why Comics Studies?", *Cinema Journal*, 2011, L, 3, pp. 113–117; J. Heer, K. Worcester, "Introduction", [in:] *A Comics Studies Reader*, eds. J. Heer and K. Worcester, Jackson, Mississippi 2009.

sub-literary merits of many of its stories, its relation to caricature, and its association with childhood.<sup>44</sup>

By the 1950s, however, Eisner was already producing comics with adult themes. A decade later, the labels “graphic story” and “graphic novel” were proposed by Richard Kyle to denote comics that were longer, more mature, and had literary intent.<sup>45</sup> Meanwhile, Art Spiegelman coined the term “comix” to denote the counter-cultural underground comics that became popular in the United States in response to conservative censorship. This neologism disassociated the art form from the “comic” or the humorous while neutrally calling attention to its unique “co-mix” of words and pictures.<sup>46</sup> The “X” at the end of the word also evoked the often salacious and satirical images drawn by comix artists such as Robert Crumb.<sup>47</sup> In 1986, comics’ “greatest year,” landmark influential graphic narratives were published: Spiegelman’s two-volume *Maus*, Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns*, and Alan Moore’s *Watchmen*.

The graphic memoir has its roots in the underground comix movement, whose subversive and taboo-breaking atmosphere was conducive to “confessionals.”<sup>48</sup> Early examples of autobiographical comics were Justin Green’s *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin* (1972) and the works of Aline Kominsky-Crumb in the feminist magazine *Wimmen’s Comix*. In the mainstream arena, meanwhile, Harvey Pekar’s *American Splendor* series (first published in 1976) challenged the superhero trope in its nonfictional depictions of ordinary events in an ordinary person’s life. By far the graphic memoir with the greatest stature is Spiegelman’s Pulitzer prizewinning *Maus*, which chronicles the experiences of his father, a holocaust survivor. More recent graphic memoirs of note, apart from those I specifically analyze in this paper, include *Blankets* by Craig Thompson (2011), *Cancer Vixen: A True Story* (1996) by Marisa Acocella Manchetto, *Epileptic* by David B. (2005), and *One! Hundred! Demons!* (2005) by Lynda

<sup>44</sup> T. Groensteen, “Why Are Comics Still in Search of Cultural Legitimization?,” [in:] *A Comics Studies Reader*, op. cit., loc. 348.

<sup>45</sup> R. Duncan, M. J. Smith, *The Power of Comics. History, Form, and Culture*, New York and London 2009, p. 70.

<sup>46</sup> Notably, it is only the English word for comics that has a trivial or slapstick connotation. The French refers to it as *bande dessinée* or literally, artistic strip, while the Italian term is *fumetti* or puff of smoke (an allusion to the speech bubble) (M. Bongco, op. cit., pp. 50–51).

<sup>47</sup> E. El Rifaie, op. cit., p. 31.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 36.

Barry. Common to the works in this genre are their serious or heavy themes drawn from life; an explicitly stylized autobiographical “I”;<sup>49</sup> and the less rigorous distinction between memory and fiction.<sup>50</sup> On the other hand, in her exhaustive study of autobiographical comics, El Rafeie offers at least three philosophical theses about autobiographical works that emerge from the constraints of the comics medium, involving (1) embodiment, (2) temporality, and (3) authenticity:

[...] the requirement to produce multiple drawn versions of one’s self necessarily involves an intense engagement with embodied aspects of identity, as well as with the sociocultural models underpinning body image. The formal tensions that exist in the comics medium – between words and images, and between sequence and layout, for instance – offer memoirists many new ways of representing their experience of temporality, their memories of past events, and their hopes and dreams for the future. Furthermore, autobiographical comics creators can draw on the close association in Western culture between seeing and believing in order to persuade readers of the truthful, sincere nature of their stories.<sup>51</sup>

My selection of the works of three women graphic memoirists to analyze was determined by several considerations, including their susceptibility to philosophical interpretation and the books’ availability. Last but not least, I was inspired by Derrida’s remarks about women as the subject of drawings in *Memoirs of the Blind*. He observes that unlike blind men, blind women are usually depicted as saints rather than heroes.<sup>52</sup> While this sounds like the imputation of passivity, toward the end of the book Derrida offers a more ambiguous reading of femininity. After having identified tears – rather than sight – as that which is proper to the eye, he notes the preponderance of drawings of weeping women:

The revelatory or apocalyptic blindness, the blindness that reveals the very truth of the eyes, would be the gaze veiled by tears. It neither sees nor does not see: it

<sup>49</sup> M. A. Chaney, “Introduction”, [in:] *Graphic Subjects. Critical Essays on Autobiography and Graphic Novels*, ed. M. A. Chaney. Wisconsin 2011, p. 7.

<sup>50</sup> In the introduction to *One! Hundred! Demons!*, Barry draws herself as the artist seated at her desk and wondering, “Is it autobiography if parts of it are not true? Is it fiction if parts of itself are?” She thus coins the term “autobifictionalography” in reference to her work (H. L. Chute, *Graphic Women. Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics*, New York 2010, loc. 2207–2218).

<sup>51</sup> E. El Rafeie, op. cit., p. 4.

<sup>52</sup> J. Derrida, op. cit., p. 5.

is indifferent to its blurred vision [...]. In drawing those who weep, and especially women (for if there are many great blind men, why so many weeping women?), one is perhaps seeking to unveil the eyes.<sup>53</sup>

Might women then have a unique relationship with non-logocentric ways of knowing? A cursory consideration of the main themes of graphic memoirs by female authors would seem to confirm this. I elaborate on this idea in the next section.

### **Weeping women in graphic memoirs: Derridean interventions<sup>54</sup>**

There are at least three ways in which Derrida's insights about blindness, drawing, and the self-portrait in *Memoirs of the Blind* are reflected in the autobiographical comics by Satrapi, Bechdel, and Chast.

The first and most obvious is how each work addresses limit experiences, through a literally graphic engagement with the taboo, the un-representable, and even the obscene. While any literary articulation attempts to communicate the uncommunicable, what is unique to the comics medium is how it necessarily resorts to drawing to give form to emotions and ideas. The added demand of authenticity in the memoir genre entails a rudimentary realism. However, the richness of experience as rendered in cartoon (as opposed to other forms of visual art, say film, photography, or painting) calls attention to the very bareness and ultimate inadequacy of the line or the trait. Ironically, the self-effacement of the trait underscores the significance of the experience being depicted, whose fullness haunts the page through its traces.

Satrapi's famously minimalist style in *Persepolis* is illustrative. In the first volume in which she tells the story of her childhood, she deals with the evolution of her religious beliefs. To represent God as imagined by a child, she draws the image of a bearded old man. However, she undercuts the stereotype through an irreverent comparison with the visage of Karl Marx, who – as an atheist and a revolutionary – is God's symbolic

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<sup>53</sup> Ibidem, p. 71.

<sup>54</sup> What follows are brief sketches rather than full-scale analyses of the works of Satrapi, Bechdel, and Chast. For a more detailed treatment of women's life-writing in comics, see: H. L. Chute, op. cit.

opposite.<sup>55</sup> A few chapters later, she returns to this caricature of God shortly after her child self hears of the execution of her beloved Uncle Anoosh, a political dissident during the regime of the Shah. Marjane castigates God and banishes him, and the following page shows her adrift against the void: "And I was lost, without any bearings [...]. What could be worse than that?"<sup>56</sup> Interestingly enough, this illustration is reminiscent of the scenario described by Friedrich Nietzsche in section 125 of *The Gay Science* (1882), where the madman – having declared that God was dead – paints a picture of humanity lost in an indifferent cosmos. The very notion of God or the name of God, as the sign of infinity or transcendence, is that which exceeds signification itself. In the Jewish tradition, Yahweh's name is ineffable while in the Muslim tradition, Allah is not to be depicted. Thus, the rendering of the idea of God – in the context of a child's faltering religious belief – in Satrapi's bare lines and inks has the effect of magnifying the reader's own childish notions about God, simplistic yet looming large.

A parallel preoccupation with veiling versus revelation/revealing runs alongside the theme of faith versus renunciation in *Persepolis*. Satrapi's satirical take on the veil constitutes her most remarkable contribution to the cultural conversation about Islam and female representation. Just like the name of God, the face and body of a woman are taboo. It is only the eyes, the organs that see, which are allowed to be seen. As a female artist, Satrapi undertakes a double rebellion against this taboo. The first chapter of volume 1 is entitled "The Veil" and tells the story of how her child self was first obligated to wear this covering in 1980. She shows herself and her classmates mauling and playing around with the veil, in the un-restrained way of girls not yet fully inducted into the disciplinary regime of femininity. In volume 2, her adult artist self is shown puzzling over how to draw a female model who, by regulation, is fully covered and appears to be shapeless. She draws herself among the ranks of other veiled female artists gathered around a veiled model, in the act of trying to draw that which they are ultimately forbidden to draw. In the end, Satrapi and her colleagues manage to find a way out of this limitation by meeting in secret to draw the female form. In a larger context, *Persepolis* itself is the visual testimony of Satrapi stripping off the veil. Her illustration of the taboo or the un-representable embodies what Derrida refers to as the withdrawal

<sup>55</sup> M. Satrapi, *Persepolis. The Story of a Childhood*, New York 2003, pp. 13–14.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 71.

or eclipse of the trait, i.e. its capacity to make things appear by its own non-appearance, not unlike the name of God or the face of a woman.

A second way in which Derrida's analysis in *Memoirs of the Blind* may be applied to women's autobiographical comics is in terms of how these works depict grief. Derrida's book concludes with open-ended remarks about the relationship between weeping women and inner vision. In all three works I have selected for analysis – as is true for most if not all life writing – there is a core of grief that is at some point cathartically expressed through a symbolic or literal outburst of tears. Each instance of crying marks the acknowledgement of a deep truth, so deep it goes beyond the mere capacity to see, overflowing as water from the very organs of seeing.

For example, in Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, she depicts herself as unable to cry shortly after her father's suicide. Ironically, the only instance Bechdel shows herself crying is when she is doing so from an uncontrollable fit of hilarity.<sup>57</sup> However, what the panels show is not the absence of feeling but the fullness of it: at that moment, she is finally forced to acknowledge the depth of her grief by another person's question about how her summer was going. The very emptiness and nonchalance of that question, set against the enormity of what she has to deal with, precipitates a fit of laughter which is really a way of weeping. The caption reads, "They say grief takes many forms, including the absence of grief."<sup>58</sup>

Similarly, grief is the absent presence that seeps through the pages of Roz's Chast's memoir about her elderly parents' last years of life. The significance of the book's title, *Can't We Talk about Something More Pleasant?*, is made clear in the first chapter, in which Chast and her parents sit in a living room trying to talk about death but are eventually unable even to say the word. Since this important but depressing conversation is postponed, in the last panel of the same page Chast and her parents are separately shown breathing a sigh of relief.<sup>59</sup> It must be noted that Chast's style, in contrast to Bechdel's more detailed realism, appears cartoonish. Her colorful palette also has the effect of apparently trivializing death, such as in her drawing of the "Wheel of Doom" (a parody of the Hindu Wheel of Life), which enumerates roulette-style choices of absurd ways to

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<sup>57</sup> A. Bechdel, *Fun Home. A Family Tragicomic*, Boston and New York 2007, p. 227.

<sup>58</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>59</sup> R. Chast, *Can't We Talk about Something More Pleasant? A Memoir*, New York 2014, loc. 11.

die;<sup>60</sup> the many euphemisms for assisted living, such as “Sunset Gardens,” “End-of-the-Trail Acres,” “Final Bridge Rest Home,” and “Last Stop”;<sup>61</sup> and the “depressing aisle” at the grocery store, which stocks adult diapers.<sup>62</sup> However, the scrim of humor – indeed, many parts of the memoir are funny – only serves to heighten the sense of the inevitable. Death himself occasionally appears, an innocuous-looking grim reaper, scythe and all; in one panel he is shown backing fearfully away from Chast’s mother who is cantankerously telling him to “Back off, mister.”<sup>63</sup> Yet despite this caricaturish prosthesis, the character of death is also the memoir’s main conflict *and* entire plot. The truly grim reality beyond the filter of the cartoon, glimpsed occasionally as though through a blur of tears, asserts itself in the actual family photographs inserted in the memoirs. It finally shows its face in the pages where, abandoning the cartoonish style, Chast presents her elaborately crosshatched drawings of her mother shortly after her death.<sup>64</sup>

Like Bechdel, Chast does not actually depict herself weeping. A close marker of her anguish is a comic self-portrait that parodies Edvard Munch’s famous painting, *The Scream*.<sup>65</sup> Another more significant image is not of herself weeping, but her father. His figure, with eyes unnaturally large and filled with tears, dominates an entire page at the moment of reunion with his wife, Chast’s mother, just released from the hospital.<sup>66</sup> Given Chast’s explicit admission that she favors her father who is quiet and submissive, rather than her mother who is loud and domineering – frightening both her husband and daughter – it is not farfetched to infer that Chast’s weeping father is her own weeping alter ego. While neither Bechdel’s memoir nor Chast’s shows the author-self crying, both qualify as “books of tears,” to use Derrida’s phrase.

A third and final connection between Derrida’s ideas and the graphic memoir has to do with how autobiographical comics presents ruins of selves, or *ruins of ruins* of selves. Bechdel’s work, for example, features extremely accurate drawings of archival materials pertaining to her father: photographs, official documents, handwritten letters. The painstaking

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<sup>60</sup> Ibidem, loc. 36.

<sup>61</sup> Ibidem, loc. 99.

<sup>62</sup> Ibidem, loc. 174.

<sup>63</sup> Ibidem, loc. 198.

<sup>64</sup> Ibidem, loc. 211–222.

<sup>65</sup> Ibidem, loc. 66.

<sup>66</sup> Ibidem, loc. 92.

verisimilitude of these illustrations echoes the clinical presentation of the corpses for embalming at the funeral home that is run part-time by her father. Her memoir then becomes a literary dissection of her father's remains, a detective story about the mystery of his suicide. The incipient loss that haunts the narrative is the closeted identity of her father, which Bechdel connects to her own coming out process as a lesbian. Neither identity – father's nor daughter's – is fully present, even and especially as both characters gaze at themselves in the mirror, mirroring each other.<sup>67</sup> In this panel, Bechdel's young self fusses with her dress, annoyed at how the costume has been imposed on her by her father. He in turn fusses with his cravat as an arrowed caption identifies his suit as velvet. The theme of father and daughter reflecting each other pervades Bechdel's memoir; they forge identities out of transversal desires, for example via his expression of *her* masculinity and her expression of *his* femininity.

It is one of the book's many literary conceits that it alludes to the relationship between Daedalus and Icarus in its first and last pages. In the first page, Bechdel's child self plays the game of "airplane" with her father by hanging onto his levered legs, as though in a swing. A caption reads, "In the circus, acrobatics were one person lies on the floor balancing another are called 'Icarian games.'"<sup>68</sup> In the last page, the same girl is shown having just leapt off the diving board; her father stands chest-deep in the water, poised to catch her. The captions, beginning from the previous page, read,

What if Icarus hadn't hurtled into the sea? What if he'd inherited his father's inventive bent? What might he have wrought? He did hurtle into the sea, of course. But in the tricky reverse narration that impels our entwined stories, he was there to catch me when I leapt.<sup>69</sup>

In the myth, it is the child who dies and the artist-father who survives to tell the tale. In Bechdel's real life, it is the other way around: she is the artist-daughter and her father is the suicide. This reversal harkens to the self-portrait's debt to the mirror image, as per Derrida's analysis: it is not herself whom the draftsman sees, but the other who looks at her. In Bechdel's case, her memoir represents the ruin of a ruin in that it is not her own image she portrays, or even her father's image of her. She depicts her image of her father's image of her image. In the chapter entitled

<sup>67</sup> A. Bechdel, op. cit., p. 98.

<sup>68</sup> Ibidem, p. 3.

<sup>69</sup> Ibidem, pp. 231–232.



"The Antihero's Journey," which is an allusion to James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Bechdel traces a connection between her relationship with her father and that between two characters in Joyce's novel, Stephen and Bloom. Bechdel quotes her professor quoting Joyce: "What, reduced to their simplest reciprocal form, were Bloom's thoughts about Stephen's thoughts about Bloom and Bloom's thoughts about Stephen's thoughts about Bloom's thoughts about Stephen?"<sup>70</sup> A few pages later, after having come out to her parents, Bechdel receives a letter from her father; here he mistakenly assumes that *she* already knew about *his* sexual orientation. In fact, it is only later that she would find out from her mother that her father is gay. In Bechdel's confusion, she writes, "What, reduced to their simplest reciprocal form, were Dad's thoughts about my thoughts about him, and his thoughts about my thoughts about his thoughts about me?"<sup>71</sup>

Ultimately, that what the artist produces is a ruin from the very beginning suggests that the self is but a simulacrum of another's self. There is no one behind the mirror, only a reflection. It is an other/self whose portrait can only be drawn not from visual perception, but from the blurry perspective of memory.

## Conclusion

In my analysis of the image of the weeping woman in the graphic memoir, I have described three different modes of inner vision, or ways by which the unseeing draftsman or draftswoman creates art. These are ways of reconstructing the "self" in autobiography by means of negativity, which is the blind work of drawing. The first is the explicit illustration of that which is un-representable. The second is by catharsis, where the un-representable grief is transformed into the clarifying *in-sight* of tears. The third and last is the co-creation a ruin self-portrait, not by looking at oneself (an impossible gesture), but by looking at the other looking at oneself. I hope that through this philosophical reading of the works of Satrapi, Bechdel, and Chast, my paper has been able to point the way toward the larger project of a feminist Derridean critique of sequential art.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibidem, p. 208.

<sup>71</sup> Ibidem, p. 212.

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