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150  
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## Are You My Mother?

*An Unfaithful Imitation* : Helen Rubinstein

### 1. The Ordinary Devoted Writer

I WAS READING *ARE YOU MY MOTHER?* BY ALISON BECHDEL IN LATE NOVEMBER 2012, WHEN I TURNED THIRTY.

I HAD HOPED TO FINISH WRITING A BOOK ABOUT MY FATHER BY THAT MILESTONE.

THE BOOK TELLS THE STORY OF A "FAILED ROOTS TRIP" HE AND I TOOK IN 2004, HIS FIRST VISIT TO RUSSIA SINCE IMMIGRATING THIRTY YEARS EARLIER.

I'D BEEN WRITING IT FOR FOUR YEARS, AND THINKING ABOUT IT FOR AS LONG AS I CAN REMEMBER--SINCE LONG BEFORE THE TRIP ITSELF.

I'M CONVINCED THAT NOTHING ELSE I WRITE WILL FEEL AS CLOSE TO ME, OR SO NEARLY ENCOMPASS EVERYTHING I'VE EVER WANTED AND NEEDED TO SAY.

BY MY BIRTHDAY, I WAS NEARING THE END, BUT HADN'T QUITE MADE IT.

THE WEEK BEFORE, AT A CONFERENCE IN AUSTRALIA, A MORE EXPERIENCED WRITER HAD TOLD ME I WOULD KNOW IT WHEN I "LIVED THE ENDING" OF MY BOOK.

THIS HAD HAPPENED TO HER TWICE, FOR EACH OF HER PUBLISHED BOOKS.

"IT'S A FUCKED UP THING TO BE THINKING AS IT'S HAPPENING," SHE SAID.

I AGREED, BUT LONGED FOR THAT KIND OF CLARITY.

I WORRIED THAT THE "LIVED ENDING" OF MY BOOK--WHICH WAS PARTLY A RECORD OF WRITING THE BOOK--WOULD ARRIVE ONLY... WHEN I WROTE THE END OF THE BOOK.

IT WAS A FANTASY OF MERGED WRITTEN-AND-LIVED EXPERIENCE THAT PLEASED ME, EVEN AS I KNEW IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE--OR IF NOT IMPOSSIBLE, AT LEAST UNINTERESTING.

WHEN I TOLD A FRIEND ABOUT THIS PROBLEM AFTER I GOT HOME, HE SUGGESTED I CONSULT ANOTHER BOOK THAT WAS PARTLY A RECORD OF ITS OWN WRITING.

BECHDEL'S SECOND MEMOIR, HE SAID, ALSO TOLD THE STORY OF SHOWING HER WORK TO HER FAMILY--AN IMMINENCE THAT WAS MAKING ME INCREASINGLY ANXIOUS.

I'D PUBLISHED AN EXCERPT THE PREVIOUS SUMMER, AND MY DAD HAD BEEN FURIOUS.

"YOU KNOW I DON'T LIKE PEOPLE KNOWING ABOUT ME ANYTHING!"

OVER THE PHONE, HIS VOICE WAS TREMBLING. I HAD NEVER HEARD HIS ACCENT SO HEAVY.

"IT PRESENTS ME LIKE AN IDIOT! IT'S TOTALLY DIFFERENT FEELINGS AND EMOTIONS THAT I FELT."

"I JUST DON'T UNDERSTAND HOW SO EASILY YOU CAN DISCLOSE YOUR LIFE LIKE THAT, SO EASILY."

I'D NEVER WANTED TO ANGER OR ALIENATE MY PARENTS. I ACTUALLY THOUGHT OF MY BOOK AS A TRIBUTE TO THEM.

BUT MY PARENTS ARE PRIVATE PEOPLE.

IN MELBOURNE I'D GOTTEN TO MEET SOME OF MY DAD'S FAR-FLUNG RELATIVES, COUSINS HE'D BEEN CLOSE TO DURING HIS LAST YEARS IN RUSSIA.

BELLA WAS THE AGE HIS PARENTS WOULD HAVE BEEN, AND THE FIRST RELATIVE OF HIS I'D EVER MET OF THAT GENERATION.

SHE WAS ABLE TO FILL IN SOME CRITICAL GAPS IN HIS FAMILY'S STORY.

I RECORDED OUR CONVERSATION WITHOUT ASKING HER PERMISSION.

I'D DONE THE SAME THING OVER THE SUMMER IN A SERIES OF PHONE CONVERSATIONS WITH MY DAD.

BECHDEL DOES SOMETHING SIMILAR IN *ARE YOU MY MOTHER?*, TRANSCRIBING HER PHONE CONVERSATIONS WITH HER MOTHER AS THEY OCCUR.

"I DON'T THINK SHE KNOWS I'M DOING IT," BECHDEL WRITES, "WHICH MAKES IT A BIT UNETHICAL."

I STILL DON'T SEE HOW RECORDINGS CREATED FOR ONE'S OWN REFERENCE ARE UNETHICAL. MY BLUNDERS STAY ON THE RECORD, TOO.

IN THE CONVERSATION WHERE I TOLD MY DAD THE BOOK I WAS WORKING ON WAS NONFICTION INSTEAD OF A NOVEL, I'VE RECORDED MYSELF SAYING, "NONFICTION SELLS BETTER."

AS IF SOMEONE WILL WANT TO BUY MY BOOK.

AS IF THAT HAD ANYTHING TO DO WITH WHY THE MANUSCRIPT EVOLVED FROM FICTION TO NONFICTION.

IF I NEVER FINISHED, I'D NEVER HAVE TO WORRY ABOUT SOMEONE NOT BUYING IT.

OR ASKING ME TO REVISE IT IN WAYS THAT FEEL IMPOSSIBLE.

THIS IS JUST ONE TINY EXAMPLE OF HOW BECHDEL'S STORY OVERLAPS WITH MINE.

OR MINE WITH HERS--I'M NOT SURE WHICH IS THE LESS ARROGANT WAY TO PUT IT.

IT'S NORMAL FOR THE READER TO IDENTIFY WITH THE NARRATOR OF A BOOK, OF COURSE.

THAT'S WHAT THE MEMOIRIST OFTEN HOPES FOR.

152  
152  
152  
152  
152  
152  
152  
152

2

BUT I WAS SURPRISED AT HOW MANY MOMENTS OF BECHDEL'S CHILDHOOD, ILLUSTRATED IN THIS BOOK, MIRRORED MOMENTS IN MINE.

I DON'T THINK I'D HAVE EXPECTED THIS AFTER READING *FUN HOME* A FEW YEARS AGO.

AND MAYBE I WOULDN'T HAVE BEEN SO INTERESTED IN IT IF I HADN'T BEEN THINKING ALREADY ABOUT IDENTIFICATION AS IT RELATES TO FORMATION OF SELF.

IN PARTICULAR, I'D BEEN THINKING ABOUT MY TENDENCY TO OVERIDENTIFY WITH MY ROMANTIC OBJECTS, AND SOMETIMES WITH MY FRIENDS.

THIS MEANT THAT MY ROMANCES WERE IMPOSSIBLY ASPIRATIONAL (I WANTED TO BECOME THEM), AND MY CLOSEST FRIENDSHIPS OFTEN FELL APART (THEY REFUSED TO BECOME ME).

FOR MUCH OF 2006, I WORRIED AND GRIEVED THE FACT THAT MY THEN-BOYFRIEND DID NOT LIKE RAW TOMATOES, WHICH I LOVE.

(I'D BEEN THINKING SOMEWHAT OBSESSIVELY ABOUT NARCISSISM FOR A WHILE.)

AT THE BEGINNING OF *ARE YOU MY MOTHER?*, BECHDEL HAS BEEN WORKING ON *ARE YOU MY MOTHER?* FOR FOUR YEARS.

SHE DECIDES TO START OVER.

MAYBE THIS IS WHY I WAS SO ENGAGED BY HER STORY: IT PRESENTED AN ALTERNATIVE TO MY NEAR-FUTURE, SHOWING ME WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN IF I WAS BRAVE ENOUGH, OR COWARDLY ENOUGH, TO BEGIN MY BOOK AGAIN FROM SCRATCH.

I NEEDED TO SEE HOW HERS WOULD TURN OUT.

BUT I WAS ALSO ENGAGED BY BECHDEL'S ENGAGEMENT WITH OTHER WRITERS: DONALD WINNICOTT, ALICE MILLER, VIRGINIA WOOLF, AND ADRIENNE RICH.

BECHDEL DRAWS THEIR BOOKS INTO HERS.

IN OCTOBER, EULA BISS HAD VISITED MY MFA PROGRAM AND ADVOCATED A MODEL-BASED METHOD OF TEACHING AND LEARNING CREATIVE WRITING.

A FEW WEEKS LATER, I READ AN ESSAY BY BISS ABOUT WRITING HER ESSAY "GOODBYE TO ALL THAT," WHICH IS MODELED ON DIDION'S.

I HADN'T REALIZED HOW CLOSELY SHE'D INTENDED TO FOLLOW DIDION'S EXAMPLE--DOWN TO THE SYNTAX.

INSPIRED BY BISS-ON-DIDION, I WANTED TO TRY SOMETHING SIMILAR WITH BECHDEL'S *ARE YOU MY MOTHER?*

IT WOULD BE A DOUBLE MODELING: A PROCESS MODELED ON BISS'S, A PRODUCT MODELED ON BECHDEL'S.

BOTH DIDION'S "GOODBYE TO ALL THAT" AND BECHDEL'S *ARE YOU MY MOTHER?* HAPPEN TO BE TITLED AFTER OTHER WORKS OF LITERATURE (BY MEN).

EVEN IF I WOULDN'T MIMIC BECHDEL'S WORK AS CLOSELY AS BISS HAD MIMICKED DIDION'S

(I HATE GRAPHIC LITERATURE WITH DRAWINGS THAT ARE MERELY OKAY)

...MIMICKING BECHDEL'S TYPOGRAPHY ALONE

(WHICH IS SURPRISINGLY SIMILAR TO AN ALL-CAPS VERSION OF THE MUCH-MALIGNED COMIC SANS)

...SEEMS TO ALTER MY WRITING VOICE

(TOO OFTEN HESITANT AND FULL OF PARENTHETICAL ASIDES)

...SO THAT IT SOUNDS MORE LIKE BECHDEL'S SENSIBLE, UNOSTENTATIOUS ONE.

## 2. Transitional Acts

MOST MORNINGS, AS SOON AS I WAKE UP, I WRITE DOWN MY DREAMS.

ON MORNINGS WHEN I DON'T, I FEEL BAD.

NOT JUST GUILTY, BUT UNHAPPY. UNFOCUSED.

JUST LIKE ON DAYS WHEN I DON'T WRITE.

RECORDING MY DREAMS BEGAN AS, AND CONTINUES TO BE, A WRITING EXERCISE.

THERE'S NO PSYCHOANALYTIC PURPOSE TO MY ROUTINE.

WRITING FROM DREAM-MEMORY, I BELIEVE, IS MUCH LIKE WRITING FROM IMAGINATION.

OR FROM LIVED MEMORY.

YOU'VE IMAGINED YOUR DREAM.

IN PERCEIVING AND REMEMBERING, YOU'VE "IMAGINED" YOUR LIVED EXPERIENCE, TOO.

THE ACT OF WRITING DRAWS OUT THE DREAM BEING WRITTEN, ELICITING DETAILS I'M NOT CONSCIOUS OF REMEMBERING OR IMAGINING UNTIL I'M ALREADY WRITING THEM DOWN.

IT SEEMS USEFUL FOR A WRITER TO PRACTICE SUCH IMMEDIATE MIND-TO-PAGE TRANSFER.

IN THIS RELIABLE EXERCISE, WRITING *CAUSES* ME TO REMEMBER, OR IMAGINE, MORE.

IT'S JUST AS BECHDEL DESCRIBES THE "CRIPPLED CHILD" GAME SHE PLAYED WITH HER MOTHER WHEN SHE WAS A CHILD:

"THE FURTHER I MOVED INTO THIS IMAGINARY SPACE, THE MORE IT OPENED UP."

154  
154  
154  
154  
154  
154  
154  
154  
154

SHE CALLS IT "THE MOMENT MY MOTHER TAUGHT ME TO WRITE."

THE ONLY PROSE QUOTATION I'VE EVER MEMORIZED ASSERTS, "A DREAM IS BUT THE STORY OF A DREAM, YET THE STORY OF A DREAM IS MORE THAN A DREAM."

RABBI NACHMAN OF BRESLOV SAID THAT MORE THAN TWO HUNDRED YEARS AGO, BUT IT FEELS COMPLETELY POSTMODERN TO ME.

IT'S NOT THE EXPERIENCE, BUT THE MEANING WE MAKE OF IT, THAT MATTERS.

EACH OF BECHDEL'S SEVEN CHAPTERS BEGINS WITH A DREAM.

SHE PLACES THE DREAM IN ITS LIVED CONTEXT, THEN PROPOSES ITS MEANING.

SOMETIMES SHE DRAWS HERSELF DISCUSSING THESE DREAMS WITH HER ANALYSTS.

I'VE NEVER BEEN IN ANY KIND OF THERAPY OR PSYCHOANALYSIS.

I'M NOT SURE I BELIEVE IN IT.

...BUT IT FASCINATES ME.

IN SEVENTH AND EIGHTH GRADE, I WAS OBSESSED WITH MENTAL ILLNESS.

I BURNED THROUGH EVERY NOVEL ABOUT THE MENTALLY ILL I COULD FIND.

I HAD TO BEG MY MOTHER TO LET ME READ *SYBIL*, WHICH MIGHT BE WHY IT'S THE ONE I REMEMBER BEST.

OR MAYBE I WAS JUST THAT ENTHRALLED WITH THE POSSIBILITY OF HAVING SIXTEEN SEPARATE SELVES.

I ALSO READ FREUD'S *DREAMS AND THEIR INTERPRETATIONS* AT THAT AGE.

I DISTINCTLY REMEMBER TELLING MY MOTHER I WANTED TO BE A PSYCHOLOGIST.

WE WERE IN THE CAR. I WAS PROBABLY THIRTEEN--I KNOW IT WAS SOON AFTER I WAS FINALLY ALLOWED TO SIT IN THE FRONT SEAT.

MY MOM REPLIED THAT ONLY PEOPLE WHO WERE CRAZY BECAME PSYCHOLOGISTS:

"THEY CHOOSE THE CAREER BECAUSE THEY WANT TO CURE THEMSELVES."

I'M PRETTY SURE I WOULD HAVE TRIED TO BECOME A PSYCHOLOGIST IF SHE HADN'T SAID THAT.

BUT I DIDN'T REALIZE THIS UNTIL A FEW YEARS AGO, WHEN, FEELING ADRIFT WITH WRITING, I WONDERED WHY I'D NEVER PURSUED THAT CAREER IDEA.

TO BECOME A PSYCHOLOGIST WOULD MEAN ADMITTING TO MY PARENTS THAT I'VE OFTEN FELT UNHAPPY, ANXIOUS, OR WORSE.

FOR SOME REASON, I CAN IMAGINE NO GREATER FAILURE.

ANALYSIS FASCINATES ME NOW NOT FOR WHAT IT "REVEALS" ABOUT PERSONHOOD OR THE SELF...

...BUT FOR WHAT IT REVEALS OF WHAT WE'D LIKE TO BELIEVE ABOUT PERSONHOOD AND THE SELF.

EXACTLY AS IN THE NACHMAN QUOTE.

IN OTHER WORDS, PSYCHOANALYSIS IS MOST INTERESTING FOR HOW IT BETRAYS OUR DESIRE FOR CERTAIN KINDS OF NARRATIVE.

THE PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORIES WE BELIEVE IN REVEAL WHAT WE WISH TO BE TRUE.

MIDWAY THROUGH *ARE YOU MY MOTHER?*, I SEARCHED FOR REVIEWS OF THE BOOK ONLINE.

I WANTED MORE OF BECHDEL'S STORY, BUT DIDN'T WANT THE BOOK ITSELF TO END.

I WAS SHOCKED TO SEE THAT *THE NEW YORK TIMES* HAD PANNED IT.

DWIGHT GARNER CALLS THE BOOK "ACTIVELY DISMAL."

I COULDN'T HELP WONDERING WHETHER IT WAS FAIR TO HAVE A MAN REVIEW IT.

IN THE *BOOK REVIEW* SECTION, IT'S REVIEWED BY KATIE ROIPHE, AND FARES FAR BETTER.

BUT THAT REVIEW'S OPENING SENTENCE IS SO STUPID THAT I CAN HARDLY FORCE MYSELF TO READ ON.

If one is at first glance tempted to dismiss Alison Bechdel's *Are You My Mother?* as a glorified comic strip, one would be wildly and woefully misguided: it is as complicated, brainy, inventive and satisfying as the finest prose memoirs.

I THOUGHT SUCH IGNORANT GENRE PREJUDICES HAD DIED IN THE EIGHTIES.

GARNER CLAIMS THE BOOK IS TITLED AS IT IS FOR "NO OBVIOUS REASON."

IN *THE NEW YORKER*, JUDITH THURMAN EXPLAINS ITS QUITE OBVIOUS MEANING:

Even the youngest reader [of P. D. Eastman's children's book *Are You My Mother?*] has lived enough to grasp the true question, which is 'Who am I?' Without its mother, a baby has no reflection.

THURMAN ALSO PINS DOWN BECHDEL'S "BIG SUBJECT": "THE TRAGICOMEDY OF NARCISSISM."

156  
156  
156  
156  
156  
156  
156  
156

I WONDER IF THIS IS AN INDICTMENT OF THOSE OF US WHO IDENTIFY WITH HER.

GARNER'S SCANT PRAISE IS RESERVED FOR BECHDEL'S DRAWINGS OF "FEMALE BODIES IN VARIOUS STATES OF DRESS AND UNDRESS," HER "YOUTHFUL LUST FOR JULIE ANDREWS," AND HER THEORY THAT HER MOTHER IS AFRAID TO HEAR HER SAY "CUNNILINGUS."

IN OTHER WORDS, HE LIKES BECHDEL WHEN SHE TURNS HIM ON.

OR IT MIGHT BE MORE GENEROUS TO SAY: GARNER LIKES BECHDEL WHEN HE IDENTIFIES WITH HER PERSPECTIVE.

IN GARNER'S EYES, *ARE YOU MY MOTHER?* IS SELF-DEFEATINGLY SELF-INDULGENT.

HIS REVIEW LEANS ON THE OLD INJUNCTION AGAINST WRITING ABOUT DREAMS, "RARELY A PROMISING SIGN IN ANY SORT OF BOOK."

I THINK IT'S A LAZY CRITICISM, BUT HAVE TO ADMIT THAT THE DREAM SEQUENCES WERE MY LEAST FAVORITE PARTS.

WE'LL NEVER KNOW WHETHER THE DRAFT BECHDEL SHELVED AFTER FOUR YEARS OF WORK MIGHT HAVE BEEN "BETTER."

I BET IT WOULD HAVE BEEN LESS "META."

THE ORIGINAL DRAFT OF MY BOOK--THE ONE I CALLED FICTION-- WAS CERTAINLY MUCH LESS "META."

ON THE FIRST DAY OF MY FIRST WORKSHOP AT MY NONFICTION MFA PROGRAM, MY INSTRUCTOR REQUESTED WE NOT USE THE WORD "META."

I'D SLIPPED IT INTO A DESCRIPTION OF MY BOOK.

"WE DON'T WANT TO WRITE *ABOUT* THE STORY," HE URGED. "WE WANT TO WRITE THE *HEART* OF THE STORY. WE WANT THE *GOOD* STUFF."

I AGREE.

BUT ISN'T THE HEART OF THE STORY WE'RE TELLING *ALWAYS* "ABOUT"--OUTSIDE--SOME OTHER STORY?

BECHDEL TELLS THURMAN THAT "BY LOOKING INWARD DEEPLY I'M TRYING TO GET OUTSIDE MYSELF AND CONNECT WITH OTHER PEOPLE."

FOR ME, IT'S EASIER TO UNDERSTAND THIS "CONNECTION" FROM THE READER'S POINT OF VIEW.

BECHDEL'S MEMOIR WAS ONE OF THE MOST AFFECTING BOOKS I READ ALL YEAR.

I MEAN "AFFECTING" IN ITS MOST LITERAL SENSE. THE BOOK WAS *USEFUL*.

BECHDEL ENVIES VIRGINIA WOOLF, WHO, UPON COMPLETING *TO THE LIGHTHOUSE*, WROTE: "I DID FOR MYSELF WHAT PSYCHOANALYSTS DO FOR THEIR PATIENTS."



I WONDER IF BECHDEL HAS DONE THE SAME FOR ME.

### 3. Delinquent and Compliant Self

BECHDEL CALLS THE PSYCHOANALYST DONALD WINNICOTT'S IDEAS "CURIOSLY COMPELLING"--USING LANGUAGE I FIND REVEALING.

IT'S AS THOUGH SHE'S DESCRIBING A NOVEL SHE LIKES.

IN FACT, THE BOOK IN WHICH BECHDEL FIRST ENCOUNTERS WINNICOTT--ALICE MILLER'S *THE DRAMA OF THE GIFTED CHILD*-- IS ONE BECHDEL TURNS TO AS AN "OLD STANDBY" WHEN HER MOTHER'S SILENCE ABOUT HER FIRST MEMOIR INDUCES AN INSOMNIAC PANIC.

MILLER'S AND WINNICOTT'S IDEAS ARE PRACTICALLY *COMFORTING*.

THEY TELL A STORY SHE WANTS TO BELIEVE.

AT FIRST, THE THEORY BECHDEL IS "TAKEN WITH" SEEMED TO ME EYE-ROLLINGLY WORTHY OF SUCH WISHFUL THINKING:

The true self has been in "a state of noncommunication," as Winnicott said, because it had to be protected. The patient never needs to hide anything else so thoroughly, so deeply, and for so long a time as he has hidden his true self.

OF *COURSE* WE ALL WANT TO BELIEVE THERE'S SOME HIDDEN, TRUER, HARDER-TO-ACCESS SELF BURIED UNDERNEATH LAYERS OF FALSENESS.

THAT'S A GOOD STORY, A TREASURE HUNT.

A HANDFUL OF PAGES LATER, THOUGH, I FOUND MYSELF "CURIOSLY COMPELLED" BY AN OFFSHOOT OF THIS SAME PRINCIPLE:

WINNICOTT'S "IDEA THAT DELINQUENT BEHAVIOR WAS ACTUALLY A SIGN OF HEALTH"...

AND ITS OBVERSE: "THE IDEA THAT COMPLIANT BEHAVIOR IS UNHEALTHY."

I COULDN'T STOP THINKING ABOUT THAT DICHOTOMY. IT FELT SO *TRUE*. OR...

I SEEMED TO WANT TO BELIEVE IN IT SO BADLY.

WHY?

MY MOTHER IS NOT LIKE BECHDEL'S DISTANT, HYPERINTELLECTUAL, EMOTIONALLY STIFLED ONE.

(IN A PERHAPS OVERDETERMINED SCENE, BECHDEL'S MOTHER STOPS KISSING HER GOOD NIGHT, PROCLAIMING HER "TOO OLD," WHEN BECHDEL IS SEVEN. THEY NEVER MAKE PHYSICAL CONTACT AGAIN.)

IF ANYTHING, MY MOTHER IS *TOO GOOD* A MOTHER.

BECHDEL MAKES LIBERAL REFERENCE TO WINNICOTT'S THEORY

OF THE "GOOD-ENOUGH MOTHER" WHO, PRECISELY *BECAUSE SHE CANNOT IMMEDIATELY MEET HER CHILD'S EVERY NEED, TEACHES SELF-RELIANCE AND SO HELPS THE CHILD SEPARATE FROM HER PARENTS AND EXPRESS HER "TRUE SELF."*

THE "GOOD-ENOUGH" MOTHER IS ACTUALLY THE BEST KIND OF MOTHER, BECAUSE SHE GRANTS HER CHILD INDEPENDENCE.

NOT LONG AGO, IT OCCURRED TO ME THAT MY "FAILURE TO SUCCEED" AS WRITER (A MEANINGLESS IDEA, PERHAPS, BUT LET'S RUN WITH IT) WAS THE RESULT NOT OF A LACK OF TALENT, BUT A LACK OF EMOTIONAL MATURITY.

THE FRIENDS WHO PUBLISHED BOOKS WERE THE SAME FRIENDS WHO COULD EASILY RECOGNIZE WHAT THEY WANTED, AND WERE UNAFRAID TO ASK FOR IT.

THE FRIENDS WHO COULDN'T FINISH BOOKS, OR WHO REVISED AD NAUSEAM WITHOUT MAKING ANY CLEAR PROGRESS, WERE NARCISSISTIC, OR SOCIALLY ANXIOUS, OR EMOTIONALLY STUNTED.

I WANTED TO EXTRICATE MYSELF FROM THEIR COMPANY.

BECHDEL WRITES OF HAVING THE SENSE THAT SHE IS HER MOTHER'S MOTHER.

HERS IS THE CLASSIC POSITION OF MILLER'S SO-CALLED GIFTED CHILD, WHO HAS AN "AMAZING ABILITY" TO "PERCEIVE OTHERS' NEEDS."

"PSYCHOANALYTIC INSIGHT, MILLER SEEMS TO SUGGEST, IS ITSELF A PATHOLOGICAL SYMPTOM."

IN MILLER'S PARADIGM, THE GIFTED CHILD HAS BEEN RAISED BY "AN INSECURE PARENT" WHO "DEPENDS ON THE CHILD BEHAVING IN A PARTICULAR WAY." THE CHILD'S "GIFT" IS IN PART THE ABILITY TO TAKE ON THIS "ASSIGNED ROLE," THEREBY SECURING THE PARENT'S

'love' for the child--that is, his parents' narcissistic cathexis.

I AM NAMED FOR MY MOTHER'S MOTHER, AND HAVE OCCASIONALLY IMAGINED MY BIRTH AS AN ATTEMPTED RESURRECTION.

EVERYONE LOVED MY MATERNAL GRANDMOTHER. SHE'S SAID TO HAVE BEEN GORGEOUS, GENEROUS, INTELLIGENT, STYLISH, AND WITTY-- "ALWAYS LAUGHING."

MY MOTHER WAS TWENTY WHEN SHE DIED.

AFTER THE FUNERAL, HER FATHER TOLD HER TO STOP CRYING. "ENOUGH," HE SAID. "*GENIK GEVAYNT.*"

IN A YEAR, HE'D SOLD THE FAMILY HOUSE, REMARRIED, AND MOVED FROM NEW YORK TO FLORIDA.

"MOVING ON" WAS HIS WAY OF SURVIVING. THIRTY YEARS EARLIER, DURING THE WAR, HE'D LOST A WIFE, A DAUGHTER, EIGHT SIBLINGS, AND HIS PARENTS.

MY MOTHER'S ONLY SIBLING, SEVEN YEARS OLDER, WAS BEGINNING HIS OWN FAMILY.

IN A WAY, HER MOTHER'S DEATH LEFT HER WITHOUT ANY FAMILY AT ALL.  
SHE MET MY DAD THAT YEAR, AND I WAS BORN FIVE YEARS LATER.

IN ALL THEIR WEDDING PHOTOS, MY MOTHER IS TEARY-EYED AND SOLEMN.

SHE'D BEEN PERSUADED TO LET HER FATHER'S NEW WIFE WALK HER DOWN THE AISLE.

SHE LOOKS EQUALLY SOMBER IN HER PHOTOS WITH NEWBORN ME.

EVERY JOY WAS OUTWEIGHED BY THE SORROW OF HER MOTHER'S ABSENCE.

UNTIL A FEW YEARS AGO, I NEVER SAW MY MOTHER MENTION HER MOTHER WITHOUT WEEPING.

WHEN RELATIVES TOLD STORIES ABOUT MY GRANDMOTHER, MY MOTHER WOULD SOMETIMES RUN TO THE BATHROOM TO BAWL.



I'D HEAR HER SOBS FROM THE OTHER SIDE OF THE DOOR.

I WONDER IF MILLER'S IDEAS COULD APPLY TO MY RELATIONSHIP WITH MY MOTHER, AFTER ALL:

What these mothers had once failed to find in their own mothers they were able to find in their children: someone [who] will never desert them.

I WON'T MAKE TOO MUCH OF THE FACT THAT BECHDEL'S MOTHER, MY MOTHER'S MOTHER, AND I ARE ALL NAMED HELEN.

OR OF HOW, WHILE I WAS WORKING ON THIS ESSAY, I DISCOVERED THAT MY FRIEND HELEN PHILLIPS, THE ONLY OTHER HELEN I KNOW, DECLARED *ARE YOU MY MOTHER?* HER FAVORITE BOOK OF 2012 IN NEW YORK'S *L* MAGAZINE.

HELEN AND I USED TO LIVE TWO BLOCKS AWAY FROM EACH OTHER ON THE SAME SMALL STREET IN BROOKLYN. WE WENT TO THE SAME GRADUATE SCHOOL AND THE SAME COLLEGE, AND CALLED OURSELVES "THE HELENS OF STRATFORD ROAD."

SINCE SHE'S PUBLISHED TWO BOOKS, IT'S FAIR TO SAY HELEN'S A MORE SUCCESSFUL WRITER THAN ME.

160  
160  
160  
160  
160  
160  
160  
160

IN SUPPORT OF MY THEORY ABOUT EMOTIONAL MATURITY AND PROFESSIONAL ACHIEVEMENT, SHE ALSO EXHIBITS SUPERIOR PERSONAL "SUCCESS": SHE'S MARRIED, AND HER FIRST CHILD WAS BORN LAST YEAR.

(I SEE NOW, OF COURSE, HOW CLEARLY THIS THEORY IS ITSELF A FORM OF WISHFUL THINKING: IF ONLY THE BLAME LAY OUTSIDE "TALENT," IN SOME TRAIT I MIGHT CONTROL...)

BUT I FANTASIZE THAT BECHDEL AND HER MOTHER MIGHT BE INTERESTED IN THIS COINCIDENCE.

IN A LETTER TO BECHDEL WHEN SHE IS AT COLLEGE, HER MOTHER WRITES, PATTERNS ARE MY EXISTENCE. EVERYTHING HAS SIGNIFICANCE. IT'S ENOUGH TO DRIVE YOU CRAZY.

THE SUBJECT IS A DREAM WITH UNCERTAIN MEANING.

WHY DO YOU AND I DO THAT? HELEN BECHDEL ASKS.

I WISH I COULD TELL HER MY ANSWER.

IDENTIFYING "PATTERNS"--EVEN INVOLUNTARILY--CONSTITUTES A DENIAL OF RANDOMNESS. IT'S AN ATTEMPT TO UNDERSTAND, AN EFFORT AT CONTROL.

THE SAME PURSUIT MAY WELL BE THE UNDERLYING PROJECT OF PSYCHOANALYSIS.

AND NONFICTION WRITING.

IT'S FREUD WHO INSISTED, "THERE IS NOTHING ARBITRARY OR UNDETERMINED IN THE PSYCHIC LIFE."

I FIND THIS DICTUM REVELATORY--AGAIN, NOT OF THE TRUTH ABOUT "PSYCHIC LIFE" IT PUTS FORWARD...

...BUT OF THE IRREPRESSIBLE DESIRE FOR NOTHING TO BE ACCIDENTAL, ALL THINGS FOREORDAINED.

I'VE SOMETIMES THOUGHT THAT WERE I EVER TO PUBLISH A BOOK OF ESSAYS, IT WOULD BE UNITED BY THE THEME OF COINCIDENCE, OR SYNCHRONICITY.

FOR ME, COINCIDENCE IS A "CALL TO NARRATIVE."

THE PHRASE IS A FORMER WRITING INSTRUCTOR'S, WHO WOULD CONJURE OUR ANCESTORS GATHERING AROUND THE FIRE, MAKING SOME KIND OF BROUHAHA THAT MEANT, ESSENTIALLY: "STORY TIME, KIDS!"

IT'S DIFFICULT, EVEN UNPLEASANT, TO BELIEVE THAT SYNCHRONICITY IS ONLY RANDOM.

THAT'S WHY COINCIDENCE INSPIRES STORY.

#### 4. Brain-in-Jar

WHEN BECHDEL'S ANALYST TOLD HER, "YOU RELATE TO YOUR OWN MIND LIKE IT'S AN OBJECT," I ACTUALLY YELPED IN IDENTIFICATION.

IT WAS SO LIKE SOMETHING MY FRIEND NIKKI ONCE SAID TO ME:

"YOU TALK ABOUT YOURSELF LIKE YOU'RE LOOKING AT YOUR BRAIN IN A JAR."

"BRAIN-IN-JAR!" SHE'D PROCLAIM, LATER, WHEN I SLIPPED INTO THAT MODE.

I'D SINCE TRUMPETED THE PHRASE TO OTHERS, TAKING IT AS A SIGN OF HOW EFFECTIVELY, EVEN ENTERTAININGLY, I READ MYSELF.

THE PHENOMENON WAS MOST EVIDENT WHEN I WAS TALKING ABOUT MY ROMANTIC LIFE.

I FELT THE SAME KEEN IDENTIFICATION WITH BECHDEL WHEN SHE REMEMBERS USING A FANTASY TO "SOOTHE" HERSELF TO SLEEP AS A CHILD.

I'D COMPLETELY FORGOTTEN ABOUT THAT--THE MANY EVENINGS OF CHILDHOOD SPENT LYING AWAKE IN BED, WAITING IMPATIENTLY, ALMOST FEVERISHLY, FOR A SLEEP THAT SEEMED IT WOULD NEVER COME.

MY BEDTIME WAS ALWAYS EARLIER THAN ALL MY FRIENDS'.

THERE WAS A PERIOD WHEN I DIVERTED MYSELF BY CALLING FOR MY MOTHER TO GET ME WATER, OR ESCORT ME TO THE BATHROOM, OR ADJUST THE ANGLE OF MY DOOR SO THAT IT LET IN A MORE PERFECT WEDGE OF HALLWAY LIGHT.

I WASN'T ALLOWED OUT OF BED WITHOUT PERMISSION.

BUT I'D SOMETIMES LIE THERE SCREAMING *MOM! MOM!* UNTIL I WAS HOARSE.

*MO-O-O-O-O-O-O!-O!-O!-O-MM-MM-MMMM...*

I REMEMBER HOW INTRIGUINGLY SUPPLE THIS WORD WAS.

MY PARENTS TRIED TO EXPLAIN TO ME WHAT IT MEANT TO "CRY WOLF."

IT WAS DIFFICULT TO UNDERSTAND, BECAUSE I DIDN'T BELIEVE I WAS CRYING WOLF.

BY THE TIME MY MOTHER ARRIVED, IF SHE DID, MY THROAT WOULD BE SCRATCHY AND PAINED, AND MY TEARDUCTS DRIED OUT.

TRAPPED IN MY BEDROOM, SCREAMING *MOM!*, I'D WORRY A MURDERER HAD CREPT IN, DUCT-TAPED MY PARENTS' MOUTHS SHUT, AND KILLED THEM.

MAYBE THEIR SILENCE MEANT THEY WERE DEAD.

MAYBE I WAS ALREADY AN ORPHAN.

MAYBE I SHOULD GET OUT OF BED?

I REALLY DID NEED MY MOM'S MINISTRATIONS.

SOON I WAS ALLOTTED THREE CALLS FOR MOM PER NIGHT. IF I USED THEM UP, MY PARENTS WARNED, THAT WAS IT.

162  
162  
162  
162  
162  
162  
162

2

TO DESCRIBE ALL THIS IN THE CONTEXT OF A "SELF-READING" FEELS SUSPECT EVEN, OR ESPECIALLY, TO ME.

IT'S TEMPTING TO CONCLUDE, ABOUT THE PRECIOUS THIRD CALL FOR MOM:

PERHAPS THAT'S HOW I BECAME SO FRUGAL! I WAS FORCED TO PRACTICE SAVING, IN THAT BEDTIME SCENARIO, BY REPEATEDLY ENVISIONING THE HORROR OF AN EMERGENCY IN WHICH I HAD NO RECOURSE FOR HELP.

OR, ABOUT THE REVISED APPROACH MY MOTHER USED WITH MY MUCH-YOUNGER SISTER (EVERY NIGHT, SHE LAY IN MY SISTER'S DOORWAY WITH HER FEET IN THE BEDROOM AND HER HEAD IN THE DIM-LIT HALL, READING UNTIL MY SISTER FELL ASLEEP):

MAYBE THAT'S WHY MY SISTER'S RELATIONSHIP WITH OUR PARENTS IS SO MUCH HEALTHIER AND MORE OPEN THAN MINE!

I'VE ALWAYS VIEWED SUCH DOMINO-EFFECT PSYCHOLOGIZING AS INAUTHENTIC AND SUPERFICIAL.

I DON'T WANT TO ACCUSE MY MOTHER OF ABANDONING OR "NARCISSISTICALLY CATHECTING" ME.

I DON'T WANT TO SUGGEST THAT MY OWN HIGHLY CAPABLE MOTHER WAS NOT "GOOD-ENOUGH."

BUT OF COURSE--IN A NIFTY CATCH-22--THIS RESISTANCE IS ITSELF SYMPTOMATIC OF AN UNHEALTHILY COMPLIANT SELF.

WHEN BECHDEL ENDS *ARE YOU MY MOTHER?* WITH THE PROCLAMATION THAT HER MOTHER'S GIVING HER A "WAY OUT"--I.E., TEACHING HER TO WRITE--IS A GREATER GIFT THAN THE LOVE AND FREEDOM SHE MIGHT HAVE RECEIVED OTHERWISE, I CAN'T HELP BUT READ IT AS A FAILURE.

HER FIRST THERAPIST, WHO KEPT SUGGESTING THAT BECHDEL WAS AFRAID TO FEEL ANGRY AT HER MOTHER, MIGHT SAY THAT SHE WAS STILL AFRAID TO FEEL ANGRY.

ACCORDING TO WINNICOTT-VIA-BECHDEL, THE "GOOD-ENOUGH MOTHER... DOESN'T HAVE TO ADAPT ABSOLUTELY PERFECTLY TO THE BABY'S NEEDS." INSTEAD...

The mental activity of the infant turns a *good-enough* environment into a perfect environment, that is to say, turns relative failure of adaptation into adaptive success.

"A HUNGRY INFANT," WRITES BECHDEL, "CAN SOOTHE ITSELF FOR A BIT BY REMEMBERING OR IMAGINING THE EXPERIENCE OF BEING FED."

BY CONTRAST, THE CHILD OF A "PREOCCUPIED" MOTHER "MIGHT HAVE TO RELY TOO MUCH ON ITS CAPACITY FOR UNDERSTANDING." IN THIS CASE,

we find *mental functioning becoming a thing in itself*, practically replacing the good mother and making her unnecessary.

I CAN'T HELP BEING REMINDED OF THE NACHMAN QUOTATION, IN WHICH A SORT OF "MENTAL FUNCTIONING"--A STORY--SUPERSEDES EXPERIENCE.

BECHDEL CALLS THIS "A DENIAL OF DEPENDENCE, A FANTASY OF SELF-SUFFICIENCY."

IT'S A TWINNED DELUSION, ONE WITH WHICH I IDENTIFY ABSOLUTELY.

WHILE SHE WAITED TO FALL ASLEEP, BECHDEL WOULD FANTASIZE ABOUT BEING WATCHED--TENDERLY--BY "ONE OR ANOTHER OF THE NICE STUDENT TEACHERS AT SCHOOL."

I SOOTHED MYSELF BY RETURNING NIGHTLY TO A FANTASY WHEREIN MY CRUSH DYLAN AND I HAD BEEN IDENTIFIED AS GENIUSES, AND PROMOTED FROM FIRST GRADE TO FIFTH.

FIFTH GRADE WAS WHEN YOU BEGAN TO SWITCH CLASSES, AT MY K-12 SCHOOL. HOW IMPATIENT I WAS FOR THAT TINY FREEDOM!

BECAUSE WE WERE SO SMART, WE WERE ALLOWED TO MOVE INTO THE SCHOOL LIBRARY, AND GIVEN A SPECIAL NOOK UNDER A STAIRCASE IN WHICH TO SHARE A SINGLE BED.

SOON ENOUGH, WE HAD FOUR CHILDREN OF OUR OWN, NAMED IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER.

IT'S INTERESTING TO ME NOW THAT MY OLD BEDTIME FANTASY IS NOT ONLY ONE OF CONSUMMATE SELF-RELIANCE, IN WHICH I'VE "CATHECTED"--THAT IS, INVESTED LIBIDINAL ENERGY IN--MY SUPPOSED INTELLIGENCE...

...BUT ALSO A FANTASY IN WHICH I'VE NARCISSISTICALLY CATHECTED A ROMANTIC OBJECT.

IS THIS THE ORIGIN STORY OF MY ROMANTIC LIFE?

"IN A NARCISSISTIC CATHEXIS, YOU INVEST MORE ENERGY INTO YOUR IDEAS ABOUT ANOTHER PERSON THAN IN THE ACTUAL, OBJECTIVE, EXTERNAL PERSON."

I REMEMBER BEING UNCOMFORTABLY AWARE, EVEN THEN, THAT THE DYLAN I KNEW DURING THE DAY DID NOT EXACTLY MATCH THE ONE WHO ANIMATED MY NIGHTS.

THIS DIDN'T DIMINISH MY CRUSH. IF ANYTHING, MY DESIRE GREW MORE DESPERATE.

"I SUPPOSE THAT MY FANTASY OF SELF-SUFFICIENCY, MY HEAVY INVESTMENT IN MY OWN MIND, IS ALSO A KIND OF NARCISSISTIC CATHEXIS."

## 5. Cathexis

I SHOULD HAVE MENTIONED EARLIER THAT THE "FRIEND" WHO RECOMMENDED BECHDEL'S BOOK TO ME IS ACTUALLY MORE THAN A FRIEND.

BY LATE NOVEMBER 2012, WE'D BEEN SEEING EACH OTHER FOR ABOUT TWO MONTHS.

164  
164  
164  
164  
164  
164  
164

I TRIED VERY HARD NOT TO WRITE ABOUT HIM IN THIS ESSAY.

I FEAR THAT WRITING ABOUT SAM WILL GIVE PURCHASE TO A LARGER-THAN-LIFE, NARCISSISTICALLY CATHECTED IDEA OF HIM.

*ARE YOU MY MOTHER?* PORTRAYS WRITING AS A KIND OF TIC, EVIDENCE OF A HANDICAPPED PERSONALITY.

THIS IS A POSITION WITH WHICH I TEND TO AGREE, EVEN AS I'M AWARE OF HOW IT ROMANTICIZES MENTAL ILLNESS AND WRITING, AND THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE TWO.

"MAYBE HIS TREATMENT WAS SO EFFECTIVE," BECHDEL WRITES OF ONE OF WINNICOTT'S FORMER PATIENTS, "SHE DIDN'T NEED TO WRITE ABOUT IT. SHE'S PROBABLY JUST OFF LIVING HER LIFE SOMEWHERE."

BECHDEL'S THERAPIST PINPOINTS BECHDEL'S DIARY AS THE SITE OF HER FALSE SELF'S CONSTRUCTION. AS WINNICOTT WROTE OF A PATIENT'S DIARY:

it was a projection of her mental apparatus, and not a picture of the true self.

IN HER FATHER'S EFFUSIVE LOVE LETTERS TO HER MOTHER, BECHDEL FINDS EVIDENCE OF A SIMILARLY WILLFUL--BUT NOT EXACTLY WILLED--FALSENESS.

AS FOR ME, I WORRY THAT THE ACT OF WRITING MAY GENERATE FALSENESS.

IN *FUN HOME*, BECHDEL USES HER CHILDHOOD DIARY TO INSIST ON PRECISELY THE OPPOSITE OF WHAT IS TRUE.

BEING IN A NONFICTION MFA PROGRAM HAS ONLY FORTIFIED MY SUSPICION THAT THOSE WHO WRITE ABOUT THEMSELVES MAY BE THE ONES WHO LIE TO THEMSELVES THE MOST.

OUR WRITING IS THE MANIFESTATION OF THE DRIVE TO LIE.

OUR MEMOIRS ERECT CAREFUL SCRIMS OVER THE PAST.

STILL, I CAN'T HELP WONDERING HOW BECHDEL'S TAKE ON FAMILIAL LOVE VS. "LOVE" MIGHT RELATE TO LOVE'S ROMANTIC INCARNATION.

FROM THE START, MY RELATIONSHIP WITH SAM WAS UNUSUAL IN THAT IT WAS REMARKABLY "DRAMA-FREE" (A FRIEND'S WORDS).

OUR INTERACTIONS FELT EASY.

I DIDN'T WORK OVER MY LANGUAGE IN TEXTS TO HIM, OR STRESS ABOUT WHETHER OR NOT TO CALL.

I NEVER FELT SELF-DESTRUCTIVELY INFATUATED WITH HIM, AS WAS MY TENDENCY.

I TRIED NOT TO THINK TOO MUCH ABOUT WHAT WAS GOING ON BETWEEN US.

PREVIOUSLY, I'D DRIVEN MYSELF CRAZY THINKING ABOUT SUCH THINGS.



STILL, THERE WERE A COUPLE OF NIGHTS, ESPECIALLY AT THE BEGINNING, WHEN MY MIND RACED.

THE FIRST TIME HE SLEPT OVER, I FELL UNDER SWAY OF A POUNDING META-REALIZATION:

I WAS LYING AWAKE **NARRATING**.

OUR ENCOUNTER HAD STIMULATED WHAT I LIKE TO CONSIDER AN IRREPRESSIBLE BIOLOGICAL URGE--THE NEED TO STORYTELL.

I SOON REALIZED (WITH SOME SELF-SATISFACTION) THAT I WAS LESS CONCERNED ABOUT ASSEMBLING THE PARTICULARS OF OUR STORY THAN USUAL.

THOUGH I DON'T SHARE BECHDEL AND HER MOTHER'S COMPULSION TO RECORD-KEEP, IN THE PAST I'VE FELT COMPELLED TO WRITE ABOUT THE BEGINNINGS OF ROMANCES AS THEY UNFOLD.

INSTEAD, I WAS AWED BY THE FACT OF THE NARRATION ITSELF.

I GOT UP TO WRITE THIS DOWN, HOPING THAT GETTING IT ON PAPER WOULD ALLOW ME TO SLEEP.

*romantic potential as setting off geysers of narrative...*

BUT I DROPPED MY PEN ON A WOODEN TABLE, AND WOKE SAM UP.

"ARE YOU WRITING SOMETHING DOWN?" HE ASKED EXCITEDLY. "IS THAT WHAT WRITERS DO?"

I WAS AWARE THAT THESE WERE QUESTIONS THAT WOULD USUALLY ANNOY ME.

IT FEELS BOTH TRITE AND LIKE VERY BAD LUCK TO ALLY MY BEHAVIORS WITH THOSE OF "WRITERS" IN GENERAL.

BESIDES, ONLY A CHARLATAN COULD CALL HERSELF A "WRITER" AND BELIEVE IT A LEGITIMATE IDENTITY.

WRITING IS SUCH A BASIC ACT THAT EVERYONE IS SOME KIND OF "WRITER."

ON TOP OF THAT, I CAN'T TOLERATE BEING OBSERVED WHILE I'M WRITING.

BUT FOR SOME REASON, I WASN'T ANNOYED.

WHEN I RETURNED TO BED, I LAY WITH MY BACK TO SAM, THINKING I'D BE BETTER ABLE TO SLEEP THAT WAY.

HE OFFERED TO GIVE ME A MASSAGE.

IT SEEMED ABSURD THAT SOMEONE SO NICE COULD BE LYING BESIDE ME.

AT THAT POINT, MY APARTMENT BARELY HAD ANY FURNITURE IN IT, LET ALONE KIND AND LOVING PEOPLE.

166  
166  
166  
166  
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166

I KNEW EVEN AS IT WAS HAPPENING THAT THIS NARRATIVE--THE ONE OF THE RACING MIND, THE WRITING DOWN, AND THE RETURN TO HIS SOOTHING TOUCH--WOULD BE THE ONE I'D REMEMBER.

(WAS THIS "A FUCKED UP THING TO BE THINKING" AS IT WAS HAPPENING?)

I DIDN'T HAVE TO WRITE IT DOWN.

THOUGH OF COURSE I AM DOING SO NOW.

IN THE PAST FEW YEARS, I'VE BECOME ACUTELY AWARE OF HOW EACH NEW ROMANCE MUST DISTINGUISH ITSELF FROM THOSE PRIOR.

IN ORDER TO HAVE POTENTIAL FOR "SUCCESS," IT MUST BE UNLIKE ALL PREVIOUS ROMANCES, WHICH (BY DEFINITION, BECAUSE THEY'VE ENDED) ARE "FAILED."

I'VE RESISTED IDENTIFYING WITH SAM, I THINK. (OR MAYBE I DON'T IDENTIFY WITH HIM.)

WHEN I SAID THIS TO MY FRIEND ANNA, SHE INTERPRETED IT AS COMPLAINT.

SHE TOLD ME HOW, LATELY, HER PRIMARY UNHAPPINESS WAS THAT SHE AND HER HUSBAND WERE NOT THE EXACT SAME PERSON.

IF THEY WERE, SHE EXPLAINED, THEY WOULDN'T HAVE TO ARGUE OVER SILLY THINGS, LIKE THE BEST WAY TO STORE LEFTOVERS. THEY'D ALREADY AGREE.

BUT I'M PRETTY SURE THE WAY I FEEL ABOUT SAM IS A LOT HEALTHIER THAN HOW I'VE FELT ABOUT MY ROMANTIC OBJECTS IN THE PAST.

MAYBE IT'S BECAUSE I MET HIM JUST AFTER I'D MOVED TO A NEW PLACE.

MAYBE MY LAST FEW SHORT-LIVED ROMANCES INSPIRED A NEW APPROACH.

MAYBE IT'S HIM.



MY RESISTANCE TO IDENTIFICATION, THOUGH--AT LEAST, MY RESISTANCE TO WHATEVER IT WAS I'D UNDERSTOOD TO BE "IDENTIFICATION" IN THE PAST--MADE IT DIFFICULT FOR ME TO BEGIN CALLING SAM MY "BOYFRIEND."

IF HE WAS MY BOYFRIEND, HE WAS NOT MY BOYFRIEND IN THE SAME WAY THAT MY LAST BOYFRIEND WAS.

SINCE THAT RELATIONSHIP, I'D UNDERSTOOD THE TERM "BOYFRIEND" TO INDICATE A TREMENDOUS SWATH OF TERRITORY IN THE NEURAL ARCHITECTURE OF ONE'S SELFHOOD.

BOTH INTERNALLY, IN SELF-REGARD, AND EXTERNALLY, IN HOW ONE WAS PERCEIVED, A ROMANTIC PARTNER PLAYED A HUGE ROLE IN SELF-DEFINITION.

A PAINFUL BREAKUP WAS THEREBY A MINOR SUICIDE. IT WAS A NEUROLOGICAL ERASURE, OR, AT THE VERY LEAST, AN ACTIVE DISPLACEMENT.

WITH SAM, I REFUSE TO ENTERTAIN AN ILLUSION OF COMPLETE MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING.

I WON'T ALLOW MYSELF TO IMAGINE THAT WE ARE THINKING AND FEELING THE EXACT SAME THING.

(SAM REMEMBERS NEITHER THE MESSAGE NOR THE QUESTIONS HE ASKED THAT FIRST NIGHT TOGETHER.)

BUT THE FACT THAT HE WAS THE ONE TO RECOMMEND *ARE YOU MY MOTHER?* FELT SIGNIFICANT.

IF IT DID NOT EXACTLY PROVE THAT HE UNDERSTOOD ME--AT LEAST, NOT TO THE DEGREE THAT HE WOULD'VE UNDERSTOOD ME WERE HE, SAY, ALISON BECHDEL--IT DID SUGGEST THAT HE UNDERSTOOD WHAT I NEEDED.

AND IMAGINING HIM READING, SEEING, AND UNDERSTANDING THE BOOK BEFORE ME BECAME ANOTHER ASPECT OF ITS ALLURE.

I BEGAN TO WONDER WHETHER SAM MIGHT DISPLAY QUALITIES OF MILLER'S "GIFTED CHILD."

(YES, THIS PROJECTION EXEMPLIFIES PRECISELY THE KIND OF NARCISSISTIC OVERIDENTIFICATION I AM TRYING TO AVOID.)

ONE OF HIS MOST ATTRACTIVE QUALITIES IS HOW "UNUSUALLY ATTUNED" HE IS "TO THE NEEDS OF OTHERS."

IN HER *NEW YORKER* ARTICLE, THURMAN SUMS UP THE PARADIGMATIC GIFTED CHILD USING THIS PHRASE.

IF THE GIFTED CHILD MAKES A PATHOLOGICALLY PERCEPTIVE, PATHOLOGICALLY ATTENTIVE PSYCHOANALYST, I IMAGINE HE MUST ALSO MAKE A FANTASTIC TEACHER.

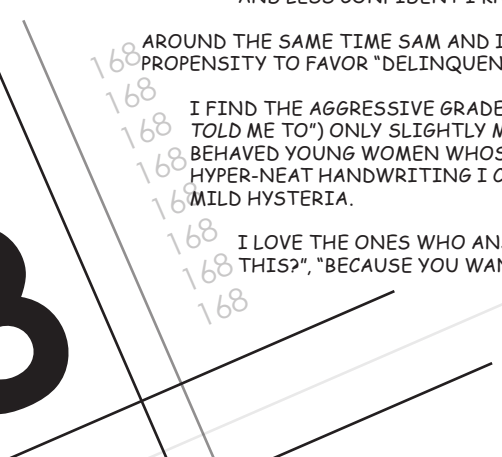
SAM IS A TEACHER, AND PROBABLY A FANTASTIC ONE.

THOUGH, IN MY OWN FIVE YEARS OF TEACHING, I'VE GROWN LESS AND LESS CONFIDENT I KNOW WHAT THAT MEANS.

AROUND THE SAME TIME SAM AND I GOT TOGETHER, I NOTED MY LONGTIME PROPENSITY TO FAVOR "DELINQUENT" STUDENTS.

I FIND THE AGGRESSIVE GRADE-GRUBBERS ("BUT I DID EVERYTHING YOU TOLD ME TO") ONLY SLIGHTLY MORE DESPICABLE THAN THE TIDY, WELL-BEHAVED YOUNG WOMEN WHOSE COLOR-CODED NOTEBOOK DIVIDERS AND HYPER-NEAT HANDWRITING I CAN'T HELP READING AS EVIDENCE OF SOME MILD HYSTERIA.

I LOVE THE ONES WHO ANSWER, WHEN I ASK, "WHY ARE WE READING THIS?", "BECAUSE YOU WANT TO TORTURE US."



I LOVE THE ONES WHO ARGUE, ABOUT THE BOOK WE'RE DISCUSSING,  
THAT AN UNQUESTIONED HERO IS A SELFISH JERK.

I LOVE THE ONES WHO DON'T APOLOGIZE WHEN THEY ADMIT THEY  
HAVEN'T DONE THE READING.

I ALSO NOTICED THAT, AS A STUDENT, I FELT MOST AUTHENTICALLY  
ENGAGED, AND MOST LIKE I WAS LEARNING, WHEN MY CLASSES PROVIDED  
SOMETHING FOR ME TO GET ANGRY ABOUT.

ACCORDING TO WINNICOTT, "AGGRESSION MAKES US FEEL REAL."

THE CLASSROOM WAS A PLACE FOR STUDENT-ME TO ACT OUT,  
EVEN THOUGH TEACHER-ME WAS EMINENTLY COMPLIANT.

WAS TEACHING AN ESSENTIALLY "COMPLIANT" OCCUPATION?

IN A CONVERSATION WITH SAM SOMETIME AFTER I FINISHED *ARE YOU MY  
MOTHER?*, I REALIZED ALOUD THAT MY END GOAL, IN TEACHING, WAS TO MAKE  
MY STUDENTS MORE "SUBVERSIVE."

I BEGAN USING THAT WORD TO EXCESS AFTER WRITING, IN AN ESSAY,  
THAT ONE HIGH SCHOOL BOYFRIEND WAS "OLDER, SEXIER, AND MUCH  
LESS SUBVERSIVE" THAN THE BOYFRIEND WHO HAD PRECEDED HIM.

I'M NOT SURE WHETHER IT REALLY HAPPENED, OR WHETHER I'VE ONLY  
IMAGINED THAT A WHILE AGO, I RECITED THAT PHRASE ALOUD TO SAM,  
AND HE ANSWERED,

"SEXIER AND LESS SUBVERSIVE? SOUNDS GOOD TO ME."

"LESS SUBVERSIVE ISN'T GOOD!" I PROTESTED. "SUBVERSION IS  
GOOD!"

HE DOESN'T REMEMBER THIS, EITHER, BUT SAYS IT SOUNDS  
LIKE SOMETHING HE'D SAY.

IT'S TRUE THAT SAM IS MORE OBVIOUSLY "GOOD" THAN OTHER MEN I'VE  
DATED.

COULD HE BE THE REASON I'VE BECOME SO ENAMORED WITH THE IDEA OF  
DELINQUENCE?

"HATE IS A PART OF LOVE."

OR IS THERE SOMETHING ABOUT A HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP THAT FEELS  
"COMPLIANT"?

I WORRY OUR RELATIONSHIP FEELS "HEALTHY" BECAUSE WE ARE NOT  
IN LOVE.

## 6. Mirror Image

LIKE A GOOD PSYCHOANALYST MIGHT, THE WORKSHOP THAT READ THE FIRST  
DRAFT OF THIS ESSAY SUGGESTED THAT--DESPITE THE SUBTITLE--I WAS  
BEING MUCH TOO FAITHFUL TO BECHDEL'S MODEL.

"WE'RE INTERESTED IN YOU," THEY SAID. "NOT BECHDEL."

IN WINNICOTT'S WORDS,

The reality of the world in which children eventually must live as adults is one in which every loyalty involves something of an opposite nature which might be called a disloyalty.

WHAT FOLLOWS SUGGESTS AN ALLURING POSSIBILITY FOR DELINQUENCY:

it is disloyal to everything that is not oneself if one is to be oneself.

THIS FACT ALONE, BY THE WAY, IS WHAT I BELIEVE HAS CRIPPLED MY PAST ROMANCES.

IN READING A POTENTIAL PARTNER, I TOO OFTEN STRIVE TO FILL WHAT I IMAGINE TO BE MY "ASSIGNED ROLE."

I CONTRIVE THAT THEIR AFFECTION DEPENDS ON MY BEHAVING IN A PARTICULAR WAY.

IN LOYALTY TO THIS CONVOLUTED CATHEXIS-OF-CATHEXIS, I FORSAKE MY "TRUE SELF."

MY WORKSHOP SUGGESTED I CUT THE QUOTATIONS FROM WOOLF AND WINNICOTT, AND THE LAUNDRY LIST OF IDENTIFICATIONS-WITH-BÉCHDEL.

*A PHOBIA OF THROWING UP. A DISDAIN FOR THE COLOR PINK. AN INAPPROPRIATE DRAWING IN CHILDHOOD...*

INSTEAD, THEY WANTED TO KNOW MORE ABOUT MY BOOK.

I BEGAN WRITING THIS ESSAY JUST AFTER I SENT MY PARENTS THE COMPLETED DRAFT.

I HADN'T QUITE WORKED OUT AN ENDING, BUT I'D TACKED ON SOMETHING THAT PASSED FOR ONE.

IN BEGINNING THIS NEW ESSAY, ACTUALLY, I HOPED I MIGHT SOMEHOW FIND A SATISFACTORY ENDING FOR THAT PROJECT.

I KEEP THINKING THAT IF I WRITE ONE MORE SHORT THING--IF I NAIL ONE MORE SMALL ENDING--THEN IT'LL BECOME CLEAR TO ME HOW TO WRITE THE BIGGER ONE.

WHEN MY PARENTS AND I SPOKE ON THE PHONE A WEEK AFTER I'D EMAILED THE MANUSCRIPT, NO ONE MENTIONED IT.

BUT MY DAD'S VOICE SOUNDED STRANGE--NEITHER ANGRY NOR KIND.

HE SOUNDED RESIGNED. WEAK.

I'D NEVER HEARD HIM SOUND THAT WAY.

IT WAS AS THOUGH I'D KICKED HIS SPIRIT, OR HE'D GIVEN UP ON ME.

THAT NIGHT, I DREAMT *I was writing the end of my book at the bottom of a pillowcase as it came to me,*

170  
170  
170  
170  
170  
170  
170  
170

& the ending was about Dad's death,

how it was bad luck to invite the evil eye by invoking its possibility...

BECAUSE I'M SO ACCUSTOMED TO WRITING DOWN MY DREAMS, I OFTEN DREAM OF WRITING DOWN MY DREAMS.

SOMETIMES, EVEN BEFORE RECORDING THE DREAM (IN THE DREAM), A WHOLE (DREAMED) DREAM-MEANING ANNOUNCES ITSELF.

THIS MIGHT BE SOMETHING PORTENTOUS: *YOU SHOULD, OR YOU WILL.*

OR SOMETHING PSYCHOANALYTIC: *YOU FEAR, OR YOU CAN'T LET GO.*

I DISTRUST THESE DREAMED DREAM-MEANINGS, THE SAME WAY I DISTRUST NONFICTION THAT SEEMS TOO SURE OF ITS OWN MEANING.

BUT THEY'VE MADE THEMSELVES A PART OF THE DREAM, SO I WRITE THEM DOWN, TOO:

*it's my worry, now, that reading this book will kill him.*

A WEEK LATER, MY MOTHER CORROBORATED MY FEARS.

SHE BEGAN BY EXPLAINING THAT MY DAD WASN'T ACTUALLY READING THE BOOK AT ALL.

HE'D SEEN THE FIRST TEN PAGES, BUT "HE COULDN'T TAKE IT," SHE SAID.

"I'M WORRIED IT'S GOING TO GIVE HIM A HEART ATTACK."

THOSE FIRST TEN PAGES WERE A SWEET, ALMOST SACCHARINE EVOCATION OF HIS CHARACTER FROM A CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE.

WHATEVER WAS HORRIFYING ABOUT THEM, IT COULDN'T BE MORE THAN THE HORROR OF SEEING YOURSELF IN PRINT AT ALL.

IF THE FEAR THAT THE BOOK WOULD MAKE MY DAD PHYSICALLY ILL SEEMS TOO SUPERSTITIOUS, I ALSO FEARED IT WOULD MAKE HIM *PSYCHICALLY* ILL.

THAT, RATHER THAN FIGHT OFF THE VERSION OF HIMSELF I'D COMMITTED TO THE PAGE, HE MIGHT SUCCUMB TO THE HORROR OF ALREADY KNOWING HOW FALSELY HE'D BE REMEMBERED, AND HOW IMPERFECTLY HE WAS NOW KNOWN.

NEAR THE END OF *ARE YOU MY MOTHER?*, WHEN BECHDEL IS ON TOUR WITH *FUN HOME*, HELEN BECHDEL ABSOLVES HER DAUGHTER OF THE SINS OF THE MEMOIRIST.

"FAMILY BE DAMNED!" SHE PROCLAIMS. "THE STORY MUST BE SERVED!"

IT'S AN ECHO OF HOW--ACCORDING TO BECHDEL'S THERAPIST--HER MOTHER WAS "COMPLICIT" IN CONSTRUCTING BECHDEL'S FALSE SELF, BECAUSE SHE FACILITATED THE YOUNG BECHDEL'S DIARY-WRITING.

BUT BECHDEL VIEWS THE LATER EXCHANGE MORE POSITIVELY. IT FEEDS INTO HER EVALUATION OF HER MOTHER'S RESPONSE TO *ARE YOU MY MOTHER?*:

"AT LAST, I HAVE DESTROYED MY MOTHER, AND SHE HAS SURVIVED MY DESTRUCTION."

IN WHAT BECHDEL CALLS THE "VITAL CORE OF WINNICOTT'S THEORY," "THE SUBJECT MUST DESTROY THE OBJECT. AND THE OBJECT MUST SURVIVE THIS DESTRUCTION."

THE "OBJECT" HERE IS THE NARCISSISTICALLY CATHECTED CHILD, MOTHER, FATHER, PSYCHOANALYST, OR LOVER.

FOR BECHDEL, HER CREATION--HER BOOK--WAS A MEANS TO DESTROY.

"IF THE OBJECT DOESN'T SURVIVE, IT WILL REMAIN INTERNAL, A PROJECTION OF THE SUBJECT'S SELF."

"WE PROGRESS TO USING ANOTHER PERSON--TO BEING ABLE TO FULLY ASSIMILATE WHAT THEY HAVE TO OFFER US--ONLY WHEN WE UNDERSTAND THAT THEY'RE SEPARATE FROM US."

"IF THE OBJECT SURVIVES DESTRUCTION, THE SUBJECT CAN SEE IT AS SEPARATE."

EVEN BEFORE I READ BECHDEL'S BOOK, I THOUGHT OF MY BOOK AS AN ATTEMPT TO SEPARATE FROM MY PARENTS.

I BELIEVED I WOULD NOT FEEL FULLY MYSELF UNTIL I GOT OUR STORY ON PAPER, CALCIFYING MY FANTASY OF THEM, AND SO LAYING IT TO REST.

I SEE NOW JUST HOW SELFISH THIS IMPULSE WAS.

WHEN MY MOTHER AND I FINALLY DISCUSSED MY BOOK, SHE CALLED IT "SELF-INDULGENT," "NAVEL-GAZING," "ADOLESCENT," "CONTEMPTUOUS," AND "LAZY."

(I CAN ONLY IMAGINE WHAT SHE'D THINK OF THIS ELEGANT PERFORMANCE OF NARCISSISTIC SUGGESTIBILITY.)

I MAKE HER SOUND MEAN, BUT BOTH OF US WERE CRYING.

BY THAT POINT, I FELT EVIL FOR SHOWING HER THE BOOK AT ALL.

LATER, I WEPT WHILE MY DAD LECTURED ME ABOUT THE FEW PAGES HE'D READ:

"IT'S FICTION, WHAT YOU HAVE THERE!"

"DON'T YOU REALIZE YOU ARE HURTING PEOPLE?"

BECHDEL'S BOOK HAD ALREADY TURNED ME ON TO THE POSSIBILITY THAT I'D NEVER PASSED THE STAGE OF DEVELOPMENT WHEREIN THE INFANT LEARNS TO SEE THE MOTHER AS SEPARATE.

(IS IT SIGNIFICANT THAT BOTH BECHDEL AND I CHOSE FIRST TO WRITE BOOKS ABOUT OUR FATHERS?)

BACK WHEN MY BOOK WAS FICTION, READERS WERE CONSTANTLY TELLING ME THAT THE "MOTHER CHARACTER" WAS UNDERDEVELOPED.

FRIENDS SOMETIMES ASKED, "WHAT'S YOUR MOM LIKE? I HEAR SO MUCH ABOUT YOUR DAD, BUT NOTHING ABOUT HER."

172  
172  
172  
172  
172  
172  
172  
172  
172

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I NEVER KNEW WHAT TO ANSWER.

MAYBE MY MOTHER NEVER WANTED ME TO PASS THAT STAGE. AS IN MILLER'S DESCRIPTION OF THE MOTHER OF THE GIFTED CHILD, IT'S POSSIBLE MY MOM

loves the child, as her self-object, excessively.

AGAIN, THOUGH, I HESITATE TO IMPLICATE HER IN MY CONTORTIONS TO IDENTIFY WITH BECHDEL.

PLUS, I'M NOT SURE I BELIEVE IT WHEN BECHDEL SAYS HER MOTHER HAS "SURVIVED" HER DESTRUCTION.

IN TELLING HER TO "SERVE THE STORY" RATHER THAN HER FAMILY, ISN'T HER MOTHER INSTEAD PERPETUATING THE SAME NARCISSISTIC PROJECTION BECHDEL IS TRYING TO ESCAPE?

OR DOES HER DECLARATION THAT "FAMILY BE DAMNED!" GIVE BECHDEL THE NUDGE SHE NEEDS, FINALLY, TO QUIT THE COMPLIANT ROLE-PLAYING OF HER FALSE SELF?

"IT'S LIKE A PARANOID FANTASY," MY MOM SAID, OF THE WAY I HAD CARICATURED THE PARENTS OF MY CHILDHOOD. "YOU'RE FEVER-DREAMING ABOUT THE PAST."

*PARANOID FANTASIES OF THE PAST, I THOUGHT:*

THE PHRASE HAD A NICE RING.

AS WITH DREAMS, THE RECORDING OF MEMORIES CAN BECOME A FORM OF WISH FULFILLMENT.

I THINK OF THE UNTRUSTWORTHY WAY THAT, WITHIN A DREAM, YOU SOMETIMES FEEL CERTAIN YOU'VE HAD THE SAME EXPERIENCE (OR EVEN THE SAME DREAM) 100 OR EXACTLY 3 TIMES BEFORE.

HOW THE "PREVIOUS DREAM" IS SOMETIMES CONJURED IN THE PRESENT DREAM, AND HOW, WITHIN DREAMS, YOU SOMETIMES FIND YOURSELF "REMEMBERING" RELEVANT MATERIAL--THE TIME A FRIEND SPURNED YOU, OR THE PREVIOUS DRAMA-FILLED VISIT TO THE PLACE YOU FIND YOURSELF VISITING NOW.

SUCH "MEMORIES" IN DREAMS INEVITABLY TURN OUT NOT TO BE "REAL" MEMORIES AT ALL...

...NO MATTER HOW CERTAIN I FEEL OF THEIR REALITY WHILE I AM DREAMING, OR EVEN WHILE I AM WRITING THEM DOWN.

## 7. The Use of an Object

I DID REVISE MY BOOK AFTER MY MOM READ IT, QUITE RADICALLY SO.

I TRIED TO BETTER ACCOUNT FOR MY PARENTS' EXPERIENCES AND REACTIONS.

I INCLUDED MORE SCENES ABOUT MY MOTHER, TOO.

I FELT LIKE I WAS FINALLY STARTING TO SEE HER.



STILL, I'M SURE THE MANUSCRIPT IS FULL OF UNINTENDED UNTRUTHS.

SAYS WINNICOTT:

The object is always being destroyed. This destruction becomes the unconscious backcloth for love of a real object; that is, an object outside the area of the subject's omnipotent control.

I LIKE THAT RECURSIVE PARADOX, *ALWAYS BEING DESTROYED*. IT PLEASES ME.

IT'S LIKE THAT CHILD'S TOY WITH A WEIGHT IN ITS BOTTOM, THE ONE YOU CAN'T KNOCK DOWN.

OR LIKE THE RECURSIVE PARADOX OF THE MEMOIRIST:

HOW TO RECORD ANYTHING IS TO LEAVE SOMETHING ELSE UNRECORDED,

AND TO ATTEMPT TO TELL THE TRUTH IS INVARIABLY TO CREATE NEW FALSEHOOD.

IN WINNICOTT'S PARADIGM, THE WELL-ADJUSTED CHILD IS "ABLE TO MOVE AWAY FROM THE MOTHER AND COME BACK TO HER--AGAIN AND AGAIN--IN ORDER TO COMPLETE THE PROCESS OF SEPARATION."

THE PATIENT WHO HAS NOT SEPARATED FROM HER MOTHER MUST LEARN TO "USE" HER ANALYST BY WAY OF TRANSFERENCE.

IN THE ROLE OF THE GOOD-ENOUGH MOTHER, THE PSYCHOANALYST FACILITATES THE PATIENT'S SEPARATION--

--AND SO BEGINS TO FREE THE PATIENT FROM HER OWN NARCISSISM.

WHAT IS MY "OBJECT" IN *THIS HULKING, UNGAINLY NARRATIVE*?

WHAT MUST I DESTROY, AND DESTROY, TO USE?

IS IT BECHDEL'S BOOK? IS IT MINE? MY PARENTS'? MY BRAIN-IN-JAR SELF?

HAS BECHDEL PLAYED THE ROLE OF MY MOTHER?

WINNICOTT'S NOTION OF FALSE SELFHOOD IS TIED TO THE PREDICAMENT OF THE GIFTED CHILD, IN WHOM "WE FIND *MENTAL FUNCTIONING BECOMING A THING IN ITSELF*."

THE PHRASE NEATLY DEFINES A BOOK.

AND A BOOK, AT LEAST WITH RESPECT TO ITS AUTHOR, IS A PERFECT EXAMPLE OF A NARCISSISTIC CATHEXIS: AN IDEA INVESTED WITH LIBIDINAL ENERGY TO A DEGREE FAR EXCEEDING THE THING'S "REAL" VALUE.

WRITING THIS HAS REMINDED ME HOW MUCH I WISH, EVEN NOW, THAT I WERE A PSYCHOLOGIST INSTEAD OF A WRITER.

IT'S CLEAR, THOUGH, THAT I'VE NEVERTHELESS FOLLOWED THIS PATH FOR THE VERY REASON MY MOTHER WARNED ME AGAINST.

174  
174  
174  
174  
174  
174  
174  
174  
174

"WHAT I REALLY WANT IS TO CURE MYSELF. TO BE MY OWN ANALYST."

BECHDEL'S AND MY DESIRE TO DO FOR OURSELVES "WHAT PSYCHOANALYSTS DO FOR THEIR PATIENTS" IS A DESIRE I SEE MIRRORED IN HER ACCOUNT OF BREAKING UP WITH HER FIRST LONG-TERM GIRLFRIEND.

AS HER THERAPIST POINTS OUT THEN, "YOU WANT ELOISE'S LOVE, AND WHEN YOU FAIL TO GET IT, YOU DECIDE IT MUST BE BECAUSE OF SOME FAULT IN YOU."

THE OBSERVATION FIGURED PROMINENTLY ON MY LIST OF BECHDEL-IDENTIFICATIONS.

WHEN I BROKE UP WITH MY LAST BOYFRIEND, I WAS UNABLE TO ASCRIBE HIM ANY OF THE BLAME.

AS I SAW IT, EVERY FAILURE IN OUR RELATIONSHIP HAD HAPPENED THROUGH SOME FAULT OF MY OWN.

I SEE NOW THAT THIS FANTASY, LIKE BECHDEL'S, WAS A REFUSAL TO RECOGNIZE MY ROMANTIC OBJECT AS SEPARATE FROM MYSELF.

IF LOVING A "REAL OBJECT" MEANS LOVING AN "OBJECT OUTSIDE THE SUBJECT'S OMNIPOTENT CONTROL," THEN WHAT I'D EXPERIENCED HAD NOT BEEN REAL LOVE.

I'M SUSPICIOUS OF MY IMPULSE TO INCLUDE SAM IN THIS ESSAY.

BUT BECHDEL'S BOOK JUSTIFIED THE SEPARATENESS I FEEL FROM HIM AS A PRECONDITION FOR REAL LOVE.

IF MY OSTENSIBLE "IDENTIFICATION" WITH PREVIOUS ROMANTIC PARTNERS WAS ONLY A NARCISSISTIC CATHEXIS, THEN I COULD READ THE "SEPARATION" I'D ENACTED ON OUR FIRST NIGHT TOGETHER--THE RACING MIND, THE WRITING DOWN, THE RETURN TO HIS SOOTHING TOUCH--AS A GOOD SIGN.

WHICH WAS OF COURSE HOW I *WISHED* TO SEE IT.

MAYBE THE WISHING WAS SIGN ENOUGH.

EARLIER, I CAST BECHDEL'S ENDING AS ONE OF COWARDICE--BETRAYING HER FEAR OF TOO STRONGLY INDICTING HER MOTHER.

BUT MAYBE IT'S ONLY AN IMPULSE TOWARD NARRATIVE THAT COMPELS BECHDEL'S FORGIVING ENDING.

IT'S THE ONLY KIND OF ENDING THAT COULD HAVE FELT REMOTELY SATISFYING: AN ENDING THAT SHOWS CHANGE, AND REDEMPTION.

IT SATISFIES WINNICOTT'S NARRATIVELY PLEASING VISION OF RECOVERY, TOO:

somehow a hatred...has to be transformed into a kind of gratitude if full maturity of the personality is to be reached.

PARADOXICALLY, IN AN ATTEMPT TO SHOW CHANGE, BECHDEL'S ENDING ACTUALLY DEMONSTRATES A LACK OF CHANGE: SHE CANNOT FINALLY CONDEMN HER MOTHER.

YOU COULD SAY THE PULL TOWARD NARRATIVE IS SO STRONG, IT DESTROYS TRUTH.

AS WITH THE IMPULSE TOWARD NARRATIVE THAT COMPELS BECHDEL TO END THE WAY SHE DOES, I FEEL COMPELLED TO END THIS ESSAY WITH A REJECTION, OR REVERSAL, OF THE IDEAS THAT BEGIN IT.

TO SAY THAT, ACTUALLY, PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORY *DOES* REVEAL TRUTHS ABOUT THE SELF.

CERTAINLY THIS ESSAY BELIES A FAITH IN THE THEORY, IN SPITE OF ITSELF.

I'D STILL *PREFER* TO BELIEVE, THOUGH, THAT IT'S THE *DESIRE* FOR STORY, NOT THE PSYCHOANALYTIC STORY ITSELF, THAT IS MOST REVEALING.

WHICH IS OF COURSE REVEALING OF MY OWN DESIRE FOR A CERTAIN KIND OF MAYBE-IMPOSSIBLE STORY--

A TRUE ONE.

176  
176  
176  
176  
176  
176  
176  
176