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# ARE YOU MY INTERNAL OBJECT?

Sharif Youssef

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*Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama* by Alison Bechdel.  
New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012. Pp. 304. \$22.00 cloth, \$15.98 paper.

*I remember hearing stories about how radical socialists who refused monogamy and family structure at the beginning of the 1970s ended that decade by filing into psycho-analytic offices and throwing themselves in pain on the analytic couch.*

—Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim* (2000)<sup>1</sup>

Alison Bechdel's *Are You My Mother?* (henceforth abbreviated as *AYMM*) is heavily invested in the pleasure of the case study. Case studies depersonalize the most intimate details of a life while also staging a realistic interiority that reflects the reader's own perverse, mundane, and storied feelings. Bechdel punctuates her absorption in the mystery of the unconscious forces that shape her life with illustrations of herself curled up in bed, not with a novel, but with studies by Alice Miller, Carl Jung, and Adam Phillips, from which she models her own self-investigation. *AYMM* enfolds case study and memoir into one object in order to track and analyze the history of Bechdel's unconscious. She framed her first book as a "memoir about my father," and this curious overprecise phrasing is repeated in *AYMM*, which is described as a "memoir about my mother." Memoirs typically are autobiographical reminiscences, whereas memoirs *about* "X" tend to refer to personal reminiscences

of time spent in an institution. In writing memoirs *about* her parents, Bechdel purports not to write biographically of either parent (although she does), but instead to write testimonials about the relationship of their lives to her own. As regards her mother, this is a far more expansive relation than the one with her father detailed in *Fun Home* (2006).

In the psychoanalytic literature, mothers recall a time when the distinction between subject and object does not yet exist for the infant. That literature also references work in structural anthropology that discusses women as objects of exchange within culture rather than as actors within it. Bechdel's relation to her mother, therefore, is not a relationship with a singular person; rather, it is a relation to a culture of liminality that she associates with figures like Donald Winnicott and Virginia Woolf, each of whom reminds her of her mother in different ways. This maternal relation is also defined, in part, by her mother's resistance to being objectified and circulated within culture through the medium of Bechdel's memoirs. Her mother is clearly a formidable person—an artist, a critic, a former teacher, a journalist in later life—and a narcissist. The strength of her personality so strongly suffuses *Fun Home* that a follower of Bechdel's work cannot help but look forward to a lengthier engagement with their

relationship. Yet, her mother is no fan of the autobiographical impulse within literature. With the witty barbs and offhand provocations that Bechdel depicts as issuing from totally controlled and deadpan features (in one scene, she explains that her mother plucks her eyebrows to relax), it is clear that, as adults, they share a complicated and deep friendship even while at odds over the genre in which Bechdel writes. Because of this conflict—the mother's resistance to memoir and the daughter's resulting complexes—*AYMM* is rigidly structured around psychoanalytic concepts that transfer the focus from her mother's person to her significance to Bechdel as a site of impasse.

The problem, as Bechdel elegantly lays out in the opening of *AYMM* is twofold and life-threatening. Employing a confounding strategy that she uses throughout her work, Bechdel begins with a depiction of herself driving to her mother's house to explain that she is going to be writing a memoir about her father. Yet, the scrolling caption narration describes a different hesitation altogether: how to find a starting point for a new memoir about her mother. The starting point is, of course, the moment when processing the association between her mother and memoir begins—that is, when caption, scene, and thought are first alienated from one another. Thought bubble, narrative caption,

and illustration scroll off track veriginously, uniting when Bechdel's distracted musings about being the terminus of her family life—both because her public disclosures threaten the family's reputation and because she has made nonreproductive, nonheterosexual life choices—almost cause a fatal accident. She attributes this near death to the selfishness of a life of writing. As her unconscious nearly drives her to her death on the freeway, she realizes, “You can't live and write at the same time” (7), underscoring her problem with life-and-death urgency. Bechdel's root problem is a cerebrality that plagues her. In short, she is paralyzed.

It would be impossible to count how many of us—feminists, queers, and/or academics—have saved ourselves through abstract thought. Yet, *AYMM* tackles the dark side of abstraction as it affects Bechdel off and on the couch. Narrative action is not the vehicle of the novel: instead, Bechdel investigates her inability to judge how and when to take action. Lauren Berlant has argued that what actually unites case studies is not voyeurism, but rather “the idiom of judgment.”<sup>2</sup> The register of this idiom changes between *Fun Home* and *AYMM*. The former is a juridical account wherein Bechdel holds her father—his closeted homosexual pedophilia<sup>3</sup> and his later suicide—responsible for her eccentric, lonely childhood. The latter deploys a

more obviously “aesthetic” judgment whereby Bechdel applies the language and themes of psychoanalysis to her memories in order to make claims about her relationships to her mother and mother substitutes, as well as about psychic causality.

The problem for Bechdel is that these value judgments leave her eternally hesitant, balancing between judgment and indecision. “I could never go, I could never even do civil disobedience!” Bechdel confesses to her girlfriend, Elouise (who is leaving for Nicaragua to do political work): “I'm too much of a wimp” (188). Of crises of judgment, Vivasvan Soni writes, “By either short-circuiting the process of judgment or deferring it infinitely, we may allow ourselves to forget the burden of making judgments, but judgments are an inevitable part of the process of crafting a life.”<sup>4</sup> Perhaps Bechdel's reluctance to make judgments derives from disinclination to repeat the reckless choices of her father, Bruce Bechdel. Soni's point, however, is that even those who purport to defer judgment indefinitely nevertheless do make decisions. The hybrid memoir–case study that Bechdel writes paradoxically makes aesthetic judgments that showcase her inability to make judgments, convincingly demonstrating that her vacillations and inability to digest ambivalence hopelessly hamper her ability to act

and make decisions. Bechdel beats herself up throughout *AYMM* for her hesitations as well as for her slowness to complete her graphic novels.

Bechdel's paralysis reflects an eccentric framing device that befits cartoonist—namely, she is a split subject who perpetually perceives herself as an object. This split thematically reverberates into *AYMM* from *Fun Home*. In the chapter “The Canary-Colored Caravan of Death,” Bechdel describes an obsessive–compulsive phase of her childhood during which she learns to mimic the symptoms of obsessive–compulsive disorder from her mother's copy of Benjamin (Dr.) Spock's *Baby and Child Care* (1946). Nose buried in a book as she screens out her parents' argument, Bechdel's narrator explains, “I liked Dr. Spock. Reading him was a curious experience in which I was both subject and object, my own parent and my own child.”<sup>5</sup> The compulsion to parent herself, to perform her own care of herself, manifests itself in the practice of archiving her life as depicted in *AYMM*. Bechdel illustrates herself compiling stories and ephemeral conversations from her mother by half-attentively transcribing their daily phone calls. She disavows any guilt over this by appealing to the reader: “I would have more scruples about this, I like to think, if I didn't suspect that she was not so much talking to me

as drafting her own daily journal entry out loud” (12). If Bechdel's mother is orally preparing a first draft of her journal, Alison herself has adopted the same refusal of immediacy. Her own process is a series of drafts in which she transcribes her mother's conversations onto a computer screen and retranscribes these conversations by drawing what she previously typed. She even draws the notebooks in which she keeps the yearly compendiums of her life: “I share this compulsion of keeping track of life” (12), she explains. Instead of intersecting through conversation, they solipsistically produce drafts for themselves, underscoring the fact that communication between mother and daughter remains in constant deferral.

In *Fun Home*, Bechdel relates that her mother helped her to overcome obsessive–compulsive disorder primarily by intervening in the ritual of Alison's nightly journal. Previously, Alison would record her day and then mark over the daily entries, putting them under erasure with an increasingly large *accent circonflexe* (from the Latin *circumflexus*, meaning “bent around”) that draws the eye around and away from the daily text. Under the guise of helping Alison with her penmanship, Bechdel's mother writes the entries herself, straightening them out, by taking dictation like an analyst taking notes during a session. Yet, the

therapeutic benefit of this is open to question: Is Alison truly cured?

Referring summarily to this childhood incident in *AYMM*, Bechdel reproduces selections from her adult journal that she now writes on graph paper. The graph paper acts as a stand-in for her mother's guidance: identifiable boundary lines prevent Bechdel's words from deviating from the straight and narrow. At the same time, the grid pattern more precisely crosses out her writing. Graph paper thus produces an effect of textual erasure to reserve the text for later translation into spatial representation or illustration. Bechdel has sublimated the alienation from her daily self in the form of a displaced alienation of text from image. The way in which meaning is prized away from textuality into illustrations—erasing writing for drawing—may be understood as traumatic, but not under the orthodox models of trauma.

The illustration of text, so essential to the graphic novel form, is how Bechdel visualizes her recounting so that it can more easily be handled. When typing (and, later, drawing the typeface of) the text of her father's courtship letters to her mother, Bechdel feels that she is enacting "a peculiar performance in which I played both my mother the reader . . . and my father the writer" (128). The process of drawing the letters of the words in her father's letters enables

Bechdel to mimic the writing of them and to also reproduce the effect on her mother of holding letters in her hand to read. In an interview with Hilary Chute, Bechdel screened slides that show her process. She is shown dressed as her parents to pose as them for photographs that she takes herself and uses as models for her illustrations: Bechdel explains that performance and photo-referencing enables her to better enter the headspace of her subjects.<sup>6</sup> A fuzzy boundary between subject and object is integral to her artistic practice. It is a theme of one chapter in *Fun Home* and the animating problem of *AYMM*. Bechdel's project seems not to be about the resolution of some irreconcilable history through the telling of it, but of mastering personal history through mimicry.

Bechdel's subject-object incoherence is a family inheritance, derived from the aesthetic distance cultivated in her family. Not only does Bechdel understand her parents through the filter of famous literary figures, she also exercises control of her own representation by treating herself as an object to be drawn, presented, and understood through (her own) analysis. In *AYMM*, Bechdel's therapy crawls and cannot progress because of the evolution of this aesthetic distancing in which she strives to become both the patient and the analyst. Discovering that her former and current therapists have begun

training as psychoanalysts, Bechdel starts a crash course in psychoanalytic theory in an effort to see her reflection in the cases described. Her faith in the application of theory comes to a crisis at the same point that her therapist challenges Bechdel's incessant attempts to use theory to supplant the role of the therapist. Referencing Alice Miller's *Drama of the Gifted Child: The Search for the True Self* (1981), Bechdel is struck by an observation that Miller makes: "Psychoanalytic insight, Miller seems to suggest, is itself a pathological symptom" (150). Immediately after this epiphany, Bechdel demands of her analyst, "Why can't my life and my work be the same thing? The work is ABOUT my life." "Oy, vey," replies her analyst, ". . . you relate to your own mind like it's an object" (152). It is only at the point when Bechdel sees the limits to theory that she begins to become unstuck.

One wishes this breakthrough had occurred earlier. Swaths of the novel, especially where biographical and autobiographical accounts of herself and her mother dovetail into discussions of Virginia Woolf and Donald Winnicott, are virtuoso demonstrations of technique but are also turgid. On the one hand, the Winnicott layouts are gorgeous; particularly a two-panel page where Bechdel reproduces a map of London to show Winnicott's route to work and then lowers to a second horizontal panel spreading

across the remainder of the page to show him casually passing Woolf at Tavistock Square, as the narration details their one degree of separation and their respective statuses at this point in their lives. It showcases the didactic quality of her work. Later, Bechdel explains the mirror stage by deftly moving between her life, René Descartes, Jacques Lacan, and Winnicott. Unfortunately, these well-wrought scenes also have about them an air of a scholastic book report.

Often, the novel is unable to explore Woolf and Winnicott as living, breathing actors in history. In a sequence that compares a (redrawn) photograph of herself, awkward and uncomfortable, at her first communion to a photo of her mother at her own first communion, Bechdel uses the photos as an entry point into her mother's thus-far-observed childhood during the Great Depression. The narration, however, is off track, referencing Winnicott's work with children who were separated from their parents during the Blitz. Bechdel sandwiches interpolated text from Winnicott's writings while the captioned narration describes Winnicott's resistance to this forced separation: "Winnicott would later say that these children would have been better off bombed than evacuated" (91). The outrageous insular rationalism of this quotation goes uncontested. Instead, Bechdel passes over it to

further analyze her mother. The pairing of Winnicott gloss and biography culminates in mere citation and application of Winnicott's theory of the true and false self: it is implied that the role play of the false self explains her mother's decision to one day become an actress. Joan Riviere on feminine masquerade, or Helen Deutsch on the concept of the "as if" personality, could have just as easily been inserted in its place. The implementation of theory in an attempt to master the material of her life strains the explanatory power of the reference material and causes the examples chosen to seem contrived.

In relation to her mother, Bechdel will come to realize that the fear that animates her unproductivity and her writing block is that, in being read by her mother, she will be subject to her mother's standard form of criticism. Bechdel reconstructs herself through text, describing in *Fun Home* how she, like many, discovered her sexual orientation in college through novels and historical treatises rather than through unmediated sexual desire. All of us are textually mediated, but, as a producer of prose and image, Bechdel desires to mediate at another level, by rescripting her mother's original reading of her. She would much rather script her mother's reaction—in her dreams, in outbursts—in advance than be surprised by her mother's real-life delayed and displaced reaction,

which is how the conflict between mother and daughter leads to a struggle over literary criticism. "I regret that I wasn't Helen Vendler" (199), exclaims her mother—who once sought a master's degree in English literature—in an argument over biographical detail in a Maxine Kumin poem.

Her mother resists autobiographical projects for their over-specificity and their publicity. Bechdel thinks that this appreciation of Vendler, who is a formalist, and the follow-up remark, "I just don't know why everybody has to write about themselves," allude to Bechdel's recently completed memoir about her father. She notes to the reader, "My memoir about my father had been published six months before this conversation" (199). Bechdel's desire is to be recognized as a subject by bringing forth an interpretation of the past to force her mother to vouch for its correctness—that is, Bechdel demands that her mother recognize the validity of Bechdel's (visual) interpretation of her own life. Her mother accepts memoir as legitimate only when she reads Dorothy Gallagher: "The writer's business is to find the shape in the unruly life and to serve the story" (238). Bechdel experiences an epiphany upon hearing this as she realizes that by treating her memoir as autonomous art she can satisfy her mother's formalist (modernist) artistic tenets and continue to shape

her interpretation of her life to her satisfaction.

*Fun Home* is a work that gestures toward the literary mainstream through invocations of literary modernism. *AYMM* breaks from the more visible authors who populated Bechdel's college reading lists to the more "intellectual" figures of psychoanalytic theory and lesbian feminism. Bechdel also engages queer theory: notably, the introduction to *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For* (2008; henceforth abbreviated as *DTWOF*) jokingly and intelligently discusses Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990), as well as queer theory, through the character of Sydney. An unrepentant shopping addict, Sydney is symptomatic of an intellectual capitulation to consumerism and a break from lesbian-separatist values. Bechdel came of age intellectually when esoteric disagreements in the realm of theory were being hotly debated in political terms by queers within and outside of the academy.

Bechdel's work shows that one of the outcomes of queer theory *outside* the academy is that, in a feminist context, it fostered the creation of a queer intelligentsia that treated queer theory as part of a continuum with LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) activist writing; it opens doors for Bechdel that enable her to move organically among Rich, Woolf, and Winnicott. Perhaps that intelligentsia also

uses modish language; perhaps, as Bechdel does in *AYMM*, the queer intelligentsia errs on the side of *applying* fashionable theoretical trends to any problem. Yet, it also provides Bechdel with an enabling frame for her artistic practice. Unfortunately, theory also makes her overly solemn. Because it is caricature, Bechdel does not take herself as seriously in *DTWOF* as she does in *AYMM*. Her author insertion, Mo, is histrionic and sexually repressed; she sabotages her intimate relationships with long-winded rants. Modeled on Charlie Brown, Mo is a proxy for Bechdel to treat her political depression with a comic touch. One of the bad revisions that Bechdel makes is to take a scene from a 1990 *DTWOF* in which Mo reads *Drama of the Grumpy Child* in bed while oblivious to her lover's attentions. In *AYMM*, she switches this back to the correct title, *Drama of the Gifted Child*, to downplay the combat between the lovers over their dwindling sexual intimacy.

Bechdel's charm as a caricaturist in *DTWOF* lies in the making light of her own seriousness, such as when she puts aside the gifted child's ratiocination to look back with humor at her precocious grumpiness. In session with her therapist, Bechdel complains, "[M]y parents said that I was like Lucy in *Peanuts*" (216). Her tragic-comic extremes do suit the operatic range of affect in *Peanuts*,

where children are most characteristically Schultzian when crying or singing. The therapist finally breaks protocol to tell her, “You’re really adorable” (217). Despite her overly analytic stuckness, Bechdel’s drawings of herself as a child indicate that at some level she has always known this. Cartooning is how she makes a case for her own lovability.

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#### NOTES

1. Judith Butler, *Antigone’s Claim: Kinship between Life and Death*, Wellek Library Lectures (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 75.
2. Lauren Berlant, “On the Case,” *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 4 (2007): 663–72, quotation on 663.
3. Ann Cvetkovich disputes Bechdel’s use of this term in reference to her father on the grounds that “[it] carries connotations that presume its criminality or immorality.” I think there is no disputing the presumption of criminality in the context of Bechdel’s use of the term, but Bruce Bechdel as represented seems to have preyed upon underage boys in their mid to upper teens, not prepubescent children. He may have been a compulsive sex offender, but from the examples shown it would seem that his crimes would fall under the category of statutory rape rather than pedophilia (Ann Cvetkovich, “Drawing the Archive in Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*,” *WSQ: Women’s Studies Quarterly* 36, nos. 1–2 [2008]: 111–28, quotation on 113).
4. Vivasvan Soni, “Introduction: The Crisis of Judgment,” *Eighteenth Century* 51, no. 3 (2010): 261–68, quotation on 263.
5. Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 138, <http://www.loc.gov/catdir/enhancements/fy0623/2005030304-d.html>.
6. University of Chicago IT Services, “Critical Inquiry,” accessed 18 July 2016, [http://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/alison\\_bechdel\\_and\\_hillary\\_chute\\_in\\_conversation/](http://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/alison_bechdel_and_hillary_chute_in_conversation/).