

# Autobiography, Memory, and Translation

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**Abstract:** The article traces a range of ways in which autobiography (self/life/writing) and translation are mutually implicated in processes of displacement, recontextualization, mediation, and even comparison. Freud, paradigmatic figure of translation and archeologist of memory, is the guiding spirit of this study. Its broad psychoanalytic framework situates three exemplary autobiographical narratives and the modes of translation they perform: Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*, Maryse Condé's *La vie sans fards*, and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*.

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The point of departure of my talk today is that autobiography is a modality of translation. Both autobiography and translation propel change, involve movement, recontextualization, mediation, even comparison. What is aptly named and fits under the rubric of autobiography—meaning self/life/writing—refers to a broad range of self-referential maneuvers and practices, and is at base a Western genre predicated on a notion of the individual self as at once autonomous and relational, and capable of being both “the observing subject and the object of investigation” (Smith and Watson 1998, 4). Autobiography claims a venerable and variable tradition that begins roughly with St. Augustine's conversion narrative *Confessions* and includes slave narratives, *testimonios*, and such recent examples of the *Küntzlerroman* as Patti Smith's *Just Kids*. A useful working definition (if joyfully and consistently revised) of autobiography for scholars in the field comes from Philip Lejeune: “a retrospective narration produced by a real person concerning her/his own existence, focusing on the development of her/his own life, in particular the development of her/his personality” (Lejeune 1989, 4). What the French theorist calls “the autobiographical pact” is the assurance given the reader by the signature on the autobiogra-

phy's cover that the author, the narrator, and the protagonist of this narration share a common identity. Autobiography—or what is referred to quite commonly, in the wake of post-Enlightenment theories of the subject and postcolonial discourse, as “life writing” or “life narrative”—is, in any case, not limited to the written, but can be performative, visual, filmic, or digital. What is interesting in all modes of life narrative is that the referential relationship between the origin and the translation, as it were—as well as between the autobiographer and the reader—is contractual.

Please keep in mind as well that even, or especially, in autobiography studies, the very elements that comprise the constellation of self/life/writing are all culturally contested and problematized today. Put another way, and critical rigor notwithstanding, the valence of the various theoretical terms relevant to the autobiographical enterprise, including such marketplace labels as “memoir,” changes depending on the specific discursive context. Much can be at stake ideologically, at least for literary critics and scholars of autobiography; what is a nuanced distinction in one instance is a major conceptual marker in another, a most obvious example of which being the ontological/epistemological difference between a “self” and a “subject”. The former term has metaphysical connotations, the latter is a discursive construction, and my view lies somewhere between the two—I don't link “selfhood” with plenitude, transcendence, or authenticity, but nor do I consider the “I” to be merely a linguistic effect. How terms are implemented and interpreted, then, is itself a matter of translation, and heavily dependent on reception, on audience, on readership. Though I will use a variety of terms today, most of which are modifiers of “self,” this is not an indication of their interchangeability within a prescribed category or lexical field; rather it is an effort on my part to gesture towards the richness of the genre and its ongoing generativity.

Returning to my opening assertion that autobiography is a modality of translation, let us consider that the autobiographer or producer of an autobiographical event is engaged in a process of subjective displacement, a carrying over of an idea or a notion of a life and/or selfhood. In the act of being inscribed or narrativized, *the autobiographer is being translated*. Being translated for an autobiographer means shifting shape and form, becoming other to her/himself, as s/he distinguishes her/himself from others

through language. Another critical dimension of the autobiography/translation nexus is that translators inscribe their subjectivity into their versions, most acutely, into the views on translation they espouse and the strategies they deploy. Just as the autobiographer is reading herself/himself otherwise, so is the translator inscribing herself/himself through an other's voice and text, into another linguistic or signifying form. *To write is to be written, to narrate is to be narrated, to translate is to be translated.*

In my talk I shall be exploring a few of the myriad ways a subject verbalizes, materializes, and textualizes the process of self-analysis, self-reflection, and self-inscription in both autobiography and translation, as reflections on each other. I do not mean to suggest, however, that the self—as source material—is a given, that it is transparent to itself, or that it is anterior to any act of interpretation. Precisely, I shall explore how various facets of the translation complex play out in three dissimilar and distinctive autobiographical projects. My literary examples are modern and contemporary, yet they differ widely from each other. As a comparatist, I take seriously the conceit that seemingly strange juxtapositions can be most productive and illuminating. My first literary example is text based: Russian polyglot Vladimir Nabokov's exemplary, self-translated autobiography *Speak, Memory* (1947). The second concerns the intriguing and divergent autobiographical positions of Guadeloupean author Maryse Condé and her British translator-husband Richard Philcox regarding their embedded situation (although I will make some reference to *La vie sans fards*, published in 2012, her most recent, and as yet untranslated autobiography), where most of my commentary will concern them as a translation couple and its implications for the global literary marketplace. The third is also text based, but transgeneric: American cartoonist Alison Bechdel's graphic memoir *Fun Home* (2006). In each case, the autobiographer is implicitly, and often explicitly—depending on the various modes and languages involved—a translator of his or her own “life experience” or past whose meaning is created through the interpretive act of remembering.

As a paradigmatic figure of translation, Freud is my guiding or informing spirit into this area of inquiry: Freud as an object of translation; as a translator himself; and as a theorist, especially in the early essay “Screen Memories” (1899), in itself a selection

of his own childhood recollections, disguised in dialogic form. The translation history of the writings of Sigmund Freud is one of the most fascinating, controversial, and overdetermined instances of the power of a particular translator to influence indefinitely a target culture's reception of a major body of thought. As some Anglophone readers of Freud are aware, the copyright on James Strachey's twenty-four volume *Standard Edition* expired in 1989, provoking debates worldwide on the consequences of retranslating Freud's works, not only for those reading in English, but in all foreign versions, since many are translations from the English and not the original German. On the one hand, Strachey's monumental endeavor has been admired for its homogeneous lucidity and consistency; on the other, it has been excoriated for effectively integrating and synthesizing what Freud left fragmentary and "processive," most glaringly for imposing Ancient Greek and Latin terminology onto everyday German words in the service of making Freudian discourse sound more "scientific." Even as Freud (and his daughter Anna) approved of Alix and James Strachey's, along with Ernest Jones and A. A. Brill's, systematizing of psychoanalytic terminology, however, he continued up until his death to use the same rich range and variety of ambiguous, and often contradictory, terms to describe the most elusive and intimate workings of "psychic life"—as he had always done.

At the risk of committing the intentional fallacy, can we infer that Freud privileged dissemination over fidelity in translation, that his conception of language as figurative and fluid, and translation as a pervasive medium of human experience, was broadly intercultural and transhistorical, consonant with his desire to attract the widest possible foreign readership for his radical creation—psychoanalysis—thus securing its status in history, as he put it, as the third revolution, after those of Copernicus and Darwin? As we well know, if it is almost impossible to overstate Freud's influence on modernity, it is not in the realm of science that he made his impact (though this may be changing again, as neuroscientists uncover the brain's relationship to the unconscious), but in the domain of culture, and the individual's relation to it, as evidenced by the way those very archaisms for which Strachey was criticized have infiltrated every aspect of our speech. All the more interesting, then, that the Freud who is universally invoked is, in fact, linguistical-

ly and culturally specific. As the essays in Darius Gray Ornston Jr.'s edited study *Translating Freud* show, many of the challenges raised by translating Freud are not only theoretical or conceptual in nature, but have to do with his extraordinary gifts as a stylist who enjoyed and exploited the rhetorical, aesthetic, and expressive qualities of language, especially that of his native German, which was inflected by his inveterate erudition and cosmopolitanism.

Freud was an autobiographer, too, drawing on his own interiority as a source text to be interpreted and analyzed as he wrestled with his developing “science of the mind“ (Freud 1995a, 30), whose purview, he claimed, was no longer only psychopathology, but its relevance to what we now call “the neurotic normal.” He wrote “An Autobiographical Study” in 1924, at the age of sixty-eight. An account of the internal development of psychoanalysis as well as its external history (Freud 1995a, 30), the autobiographical essay was published as a contribution to a volume of “self-portraits” by prominent physicians. Far less personal than his case studies, his correspondence with Fleiss, the seemingly minor “Screen Memories” (1899), the monumental *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), or *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901), “An Autobiographical Study” is nonetheless a revealing document and has substantial explanatory power. Freud used this essay as an occasion to present an introduction or overview of his ideas as they evolved, and of their reception in the international scientific community. As a self-portrait of the investigator, it tempts the reader to surmise that in Freud’s mind “la psychanalyse, c’est moi!”

Translation is central to the story Freud tells. In the early days of his career, he recounts, the planes shifted considerably when, as a foreign student and auditor in Paris, he offered to translate “a new volume of [Charcot’s] lectures into German.” Freud translated not only the third volume of Charcot’s *Lessons on Diseases of the Nervous System* (1886) and *Tuesday’s Lessons at the Salpêtrière* (1887–1888), but five entire books in all, from French and English into German. Though he had a position as a lecturer in pathology in Vienna, it was his work as a translator that gained him entry into Charcot’s circle of personal acquaintances and full participation in the activities at Salpêtrière Clinic (Freud 1995a, 6).

According to Patrick Mahony, “Freud made translation a unified field concept” (Mahony 2001, 837). Mahony elaborates that

in psychoanalysis the patient may be psychically conceived as a succession or accumulation of translations, with the analyst assuming the complementary role of a translator. By means of translations—psychic material is itself already a translation in need of a second order translation—“the analyst effects a translation of what is unconscious into consciousness” (Mahony 2001, 837); that is, dreams translate what the dreamer dreams to what the dreamer remembers and reports, translates from mental image to verbal narration. Mahony also gives the following specific examples of what Freud deemed to be translations: dreams; generalized hysterical, obsessive, and phobic symptomatology; parapraxis (this term for a slip of the tongue is itself a wonderful example of a Strachey classical archaism); fetishes; the choice of suicidal means; and the analyst’s interpretations (Mahony 2001, 837). Freud’s autobiographical study is also a form of translation of his life and career as a scientist and a defense, even an apologia, of his intellectual legacy.

I hope that these broad psychoanalytic insights will provide us with an interpretive framework for thinking figuratively and rhetorically about the autobiographers and translators we are about to discuss.

### **Vladimir Nabokov**

Nabokov’s *Speak, Memory* (1947) is a virtuosic synesthetic, translingual, transmodal, transcultural performance. I will barely pierce the surface of its many layers and textures today. By making the reader of the foreword privy to the many stages of rewriting, reframing, and recasting of what he calls “a systematically correlated assemblage of personal recollections ranging geographically from St. Petersburg to St. Nazaire, and covering thirty-seven years, from August 1903 to May 1940” (Nabokov 1947, 9), Nabokov might be giving us too much, before the first page of the autobiography proper has even been accessed. The detailed paratextual information, much like the exquisite meditation on the nature of a privileged life as only a consummately privileged polyglot consciousness could render it, is daunting and somewhat overwrought. Translated into French, German, Spanish, and Italian by other translators, Nabokov explains that “for the present, final edition [...] I have availed myself of the corrections I made while turning it into Russian. This re-Englishing of

a Russian re-version of what had been an English re-telling of Russian memories in the first place” (Nabokov 1947, 12–13) is likened to the kinds of multiple metamorphoses familiar to butterflies, but previously untried by humans. If in the foreword he posits himself as remarkable among his species, those very literary and linguistic feats are grounded in a principle of translation that treats every change in form as a new thing to be celebrated, but not at the expense of preserving or immortalizing moments or stages of perfection. And yet, the exiled writer’s essay on the challenges of translating Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* into English reveals a translator hostile to a free-form, target-friendly version of a classic. His rarefied, academic, heavily annotated translation privileged its own elite audience, reflecting, as Lawrence Venuti puts it, Nabokov’s “deep nostalgic investment in the Russian language and in canonical works of Russian literature while disdain-ing the homogenizing tendencies of American consumer culture” (Venuti 2012, 110–111).

Is there a connection between Nabokov’s protectionist views of the role of a literary translator and the way he translated his own life? A self-declared “chronophobic” (Nabokov 1947, 19), his disclaimer about any affection for the psychoanalytic method might suggest there is:

I have ransacked my oldest dreams for keys and clues—and let me say at once that I reject completely the vulgar, shabby, fundamentally medieval world of Freud, with its crankish quest for sexual symbols... and its bitter little embryos spying, from their natural nooks, upon the love life of their parents. (Nabokov 1947, 20)

Doth he protest too much? It is not my intention here to put little Vladimir’s psyche on the couch, despite the wealth of material he provides throughout this text (and elsewhere in his oeuvre), only to indicate that while Nabokov is reacting to the most reductive and vulgar version of Freud in terms of symbolic content, he is also using hermeneutic instruments in ways that strongly resemble Freud’s methods. Each embodies qualities of both the scientist and the poet, and both are formalists of the first order. Indeed, as masterful interpreters of signs and symptoms, and decoders of patterns, both are drawn to structural repetitions, as well as to what escapes those structures and strictures. Critics, among them Jeffrey Berman and Jenefer Shute, have addressed why the

figure of Freud looms so large—and so negatively—for Nabokov, as well as the implications for an understanding of his fiction, especially *Lolita*. It seems to me that what Nabokov rejects in Freud is his primordial pessimism about human nature, and that what he negates is the general principle that he—that is, Nabokov—might not be master of his own mind.

If the opening chapter of *Speak, Memory* is about anything, it is the eros/thanatos dialectic, as is the book's final chapter, which focuses on intergenerational transmission and the transcendent or redemptive power of the aesthetic imagination. But my aim now is to direct attention to the associative method of forming composite events that Freud and Nabokov share, and which serves as Nabokov's template or creed for turning one's life into a work of art. What Nabokov calls "the match theme"—the Freudian germ of which is a verbal or imagistic link revealing a thematic or symbolic correspondence—is exemplified in two fabulously dramatic events drawn from his childhood. One of those themes is the tragic irony of history, as illustrated in the destiny of a certain General Kuropatkin, a friend of Nabokov's father, who in one scene, while playing a "match" game with young Vladimir in which he "depicts the sea in calm and stormy weather," (Nabokov 1947, 27) is informed that he will lead the Russian Army against the Japanese in the 1905 War. Fifteen years later, disguised as a peasant, he comes across Nabokov's father in flight from the Bolsheviks, and asks him for a match.

Though his childhood was indeed blessed, Nabokov's message to his attentive reader above all is that the art of living is less a matter of being endowed with rich original content than it is a matter of a perceiving intelligence imposing sensorial and cognitive mastery over the flux and chaos of the world. "The match theme" is a lesson in how to work with one's source material: tracking, tracing, and linking across time and space seemingly unrelated episodes or events through a metonymic/metaphorical leap that brings them together and thereby raises them to a higher level of meaning, a threshold for further reflection, interpretation, and commentary. (It is, for example, a lesson in linking the moves on a chessboard with the assassination of his beloved father, not as the outcome of a duel the child dreads, but at a public lecture, when it was least expected and he was shielding the body of a more likely politi-



cal target.) Nabokov's technique for critical reading is the model for translating a life, and it is, then, primarily aesthetic in nature. That is, it foregrounds the structural and formal aspects of even the most spectacular and catastrophic of human experiences without divesting the events of any of their wondrous or devastating force, identifying—or, rather, creating—patterns, establishing affinities and thematic correspondences amidst/across what would otherwise remain inchoate, separate, isolated ephemera. “The following of such thematic designs through one's life should be, I think, the true purpose of autobiography” (Nabokov 1974, 21). After *Speak, Memory*, not only is it impossible to read autobiography the same way again, but it is impossible to live autobiographically—that is, to think about one's life as a thematic design—in the same fashion once one has internalized Nabokov's model.

The opening passage of *Speak, Memory*—beginning with “The cradle rocks above an abyss” on page 19—offers one of the most striking images and meditations on mortality to be found in the annals of autobiography. Yet the genesis of *Speak, Memory* was what is now the book's fifth chapter, written originally in French and titled “Mademoiselle O.” That Nabokov was both worldly literate and deeply imprinted by Russian literature is made manifest in the portrait which serves as the premise for this chapter. Its declared purpose is to reclaim through memory the destiny of his old French governess, whom he felt he had betrayed by having previously turned her into a fictional character, thus denying her the independent existence that rightfully belonged to her.

Nabokov's revisitation of the Swiss governess “Mademoiselle” begins with her arrival by sleigh to the Russian countryside in the winter of 1905–1906. Though of his many tutors and governesses she was the object of some ridicule and derision, he now pays selective tribute to her “lovely” French and its impact on his appreciation for French literature. I have chosen to focus on this recontextualized portrait of the hapless, enormous, miserable figure, because indeed she may not be substantial enough on her own terms to support the attempt “to salvage her from fiction” (Nabokov 1947, 117). And this is not, despite the reasons he initially gives, Nabokov's prime motive for memorializing her. The autobiographer announces straight away that he is imagining the scene, that he is seeking recourse in fiction once again: “I was not

there to greet her; but I do so now as I try to imagine what she saw and felt at that last stage of her fabulous and ill-timed journey” (Nabokov 1947, 98).

The memorialist’s conjuring of poor Mademoiselle—who remains a rather disdained and pathetic character in this portrayal—has been culturally, linguistically, and, of course, physically displaced to the Russian steppes from her native Switzerland. The overarching image is of snow.

Very lovely, very lonesome. But what am I doing in this stereoscopic dreamland? How did I get here? Somehow, the two sleighs have slipped away, leaving behind a passportless spy standing on the blue-white road in his New England snow-boots and stormcoat. The vibration in my ears is no longer their receding bells, but only my old blood singing. All is still spellbound, enthralled by the moon, fancy’s rear-vision mirror. The snow is real, though, and as I bend to it and scoop up a handful, sixty years crumble to glittering frost-dust between my fingers. (Nabokov 1947, 100)

A symbolic identification grounds Nabokov’s authorial/auto-biographical position in this classic Russian novelistic scene in which, laying his devices bare, he inserts himself at the end as both observing subject (“passportless spy”) and object of reflection (“But what am I doing [...] ? How did I get here?”) through the temporal and spatial displacement of “snow,” and Nabokov and Mademoiselle, who now occupy virtually equivalent or transposable positions in relation to the other’s estrangement. His underlying resistance to the idea that perhaps there was more to Mademoiselle than her lack of finesse is made clear to him belatedly, through his own experience of exile and loss, primarily as a result of the Russian Revolution. In an act of literary mediation and empathic projection he comes to understand the gravitas of her life story as a key to understanding his own. With retrospective insight he says at another point in the chapter that this is something “I could appreciate only after the things and beings that I had most loved in the security of my childhood had been turned to ashes or shot through the heart” (Nabokov 1947, 117).

Nabokov’s insight, shared with Freud, is that all memory is mediated and motivated, and dependent on a dynamic imagination; because the psychic content of original memory is not available, whether because of absence or inaccessibility, it cannot be

restored without being translated to later experiences, desires, and needs.

### **Maryse Condé**

Maryse Condé, Guadeloupean author of several novels about Caribbean heroines in Africa, slavery in the Antilles, the Salem witch trials, and even a revisionary reading of *Wuthering Heights*, has written two autobiographies: *Tales from the Heart: True Stories From My Childhood*,<sup>1</sup> and the recently published—but still untranslated—*La vie sans fards* (2012). Self-identified as a classically-schooled Francophone Caribbean writer, by which I mean that her readership would typically comprise Continental French and Antillean readers, she has attained preeminent status in the literary marketplace as a global Caribbean writer—in the company of Derek Walcott, Caryl Phillips, Edouard Glissant, Patrick Chamoiseau, Rafael Confiant, and Edwidge Danticat—as a result of translation. Being translated, especially into English, has enabled Condé’s work—albeit in altered form—to exceed its linguistic and cultural boundaries and live beyond its own spatial and temporal borders, however they have been constituted. In short, it has brought her the widest possible reception.

And yet Condé’s translation complex is of a special order, especially when read in a context—familial and erotic—that so readily invites a psychoanalytic interpretation; I am not going to undertake such a reading here. *La vie sans fards* is devoted primarily to the years she spent in West Africa during the politically promising period of decolonization, and then the corruption, hypocrisy, and repression of the postindependence regimes. This experience, which she consistently recounts in amatory language, “occupied a central place in my life and in my imagination” (Condé 2012, 16; translation mine); but it was a painful disappointment, a doomed affair. Her less than positive depiction of African life, as seen in both her fiction and memoir, has made her a provocative and somewhat controversial figure in postcolonial literary circles. The continent couldn’t attract her sufficiently or compel her enough—despite long and varied opportunities during her sojourns in Guinea, Ghana, Ivory Coast,

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<sup>1</sup> Originally published in French in 1999; translated into English by Richard Philcox in 2001. In-text reference will be to the 2001 English edition.

and Senegal—to learn to speak Malinké, Fulani, Peulh, or Wolof. In this failed intercultural encounter in which France, the Caribbean, and Africa are not reduced to the points they occupy in a colonial constellation, Condé represents herself as untranslatable, unable to be taken on her own terms in a different context. Conversely, her inability to find reflections of herself in Africa, to be recognized as herself and not a “toubabesse” [white woman, because Antillaise, for example], reinforces her sense of isolation and exclusion, whether it be a result of history, racial identity, and/or cultural and class values. It is an otherness to which she clings and which she reads as immutable.

This paradoxical sense of her own untranslatability drives the narrative, as the autobiographer depicts herself struggling against forces and structures that threaten her integrity, as metaphorically and literally understood. The critical matter pertaining to translation and memory here is not the authenticity or veracity of the self-portrait as the autobiographer renders it, but the conditions of its reception, as she has experienced it. Distinguishing her motivations from the idealizing ones most often attributed to the conventions of recounting a life, Condé proclaims her passion for “unvarnished” truth-telling in the introduction, as she stakes a claim for her singularity while also invoking a more abstract, albeit gendered, universality. She inscribes herself squarely within the French Enlightenment and Romantic traditions from the outset: “I want to display to my kind a woman in every way true to nature, and the woman I portray shall be myself” (Condé 2012, 12; translation mine).

Despite Condé’s resolute individualism, feisty independence, and political risk-taking, her lively and sometimes harrowing narrative is framed, on its first and last pages, by her two husbands, the Guinean Mamadou Condé and the English Richard Philcox, whom she met in Senegal. Her marriage to Philcox will take place outside the narrative, but she pays homage to their first meeting and telegraphs what is to follow. “He was the one who would change my life. He would take me to Europe and then to Guadeloupe. We would discover America together. He would help me gently separate from my children and resume my studies. Above all, thanks to him, I would begin my career as a writer” (Condé 2012, 334; translation mine).

Condé herself is an accomplished English speaker and scholar

of English literature, who taught for many years at Columbia and other esteemed universities; but she seems to consider translation at best as a mechanistic exercise or practical necessity, not a creative practice worthy of her critical attention. Her manifest lack of interest in translations of her work, when the stakes are, ironically, so high, sound disingenuous for many reasons—not the least of which is that she lives on such intimate and privileged terms with her translator. One could conceive such indifference as a matter of blind trust, and a convenient division of labor, since—in addition to being her translator—Philcox also handles all of her negotiations. Ironically, however, their embedded relation seems to ensure that instead of being on the same page regarding translation, their perspectives as a translational couple remain absolutely divergent.

As is evidenced in a fascinating 1996 interview with Doris Kadish and Françoise Massardier (the authors of *Translating Slavery*) conducted in French with Philcox (with Condé present) in which he describes his training, strategy, and evolution as a translator, Philcox sees his role as quite important. He valorizes the complex process of “recreating” a text and bringing the writer to a different cultural—that is, Anglophone—audience (Kadish and Massardier, 751). Not only does he believe there is an affinity between the original and the translation, but he also maintains that he is “communicating the author’s writing in another language, in another culture” (Kadish and Massardier, 751; translation mine). Moreover, his translation practice is patently target-oriented; he seeks to make the author, as he says, more “transparent” to the reader, but not at the price of displacing “the geography of the text,” whatever it may be. The challenge for him may be less a question of linguistic specificity than of Condé’s “esoteric” cultural references; he even acknowledges being “market-driven” on her behalf. Rather than feeling diminished or constrained, Philcox concedes that he feels liberated by Condé’s indifference to his practice, as well as his product (Kadish and Massardier, 755). And he ultimately attributes his progress over the course of his career as a translator, interestingly enough, not to years of living with Condé, his author–wife, or to the cumulative experience of translating her work, but to studying translation theory (Kadish and Massardier, 755–756). That Philcox is sensitive to the gender question—“Do I have the right to translate a novel written by a

woman? This question has greatly haunted me” (Kadish and Mas-sardier, 756)—reveals not only a great deal about his own refined and acute sensibility, but also attests to the primacy of gender as a marker of identity for Condé; whereas race seems to figure little, if at all, as a factor of difference for either of them.

It is, of course, quite possible that Condé’s antitranslation posture is purely performative; but, if so, what is its value and what are its implications? What Condé stands for in this translation couple is the irreducible difference between languages. Thus, whereas the translator, invested in global transmission and reception, considers his work to be coextensive with the original author’s work, she—dedicated to perfecting her own literary style in her own tongue—considers them to be distinct. As I have said, Condé has stated her position on many occasions: that translation, being a transforming principle, doesn’t regard her, that she is “othered” in translation, both culturally and linguistically. Her insistence on this fact is consonant with what would seem to be the overarching message of her autobiographical oeuvre. In a conversation with Emily Apter, which was conducted in French—“transposed,” not “transcribed” (Apter’s words) and translated into English, and which appeared in 2001—Condé puts a fine point on what I have described above:

I have never read any of my books in translation... In translation, the play of languages is destroyed. Of course, I recognize that my works have to be translated, but they are really not me. Only the original really counts for me. Some people say that translation adds to the original. For me, it is another work, perhaps an interesting one, but very distant from the original. (Apter, 92)

Beyond the intriguing and alluring personal and domestic implications of Condé and Philcox as a translation couple, together they enact the ongoing, defining, and productive tension within translation studies, especially in relation to world literature and the global marketplace. Whatever the psychological source of Condé’s alienation or iconoclastic individualism, her view of translation as (1) radical difference and of untranslatability as (2) an act of personal or even political resistance, actually coexists, of course—as it has throughout history—with the enduring, competing reality of multilingualism. The inherent paradox of untranslatability in translation is what makes cultural memory possible. What this

translation couple reminds us of is that we must remain vigilant in the face of world literature's instrumentalist, ever-serviceable view of translatability as an unproblematic given.

### **Alison Bechdel**

Translation is the major operative principle in comics, defined for our purposes today as a juxtaposition of words and images that create a sustained narrative within deliberately sequenced bordered panels. In its particular interplay of the visual and the verbal, comics are not the verbal representation of visual art — ekphrasis — nor a representation of the world, but an interpretation; indeed, as Douglas Wolk puts it in *Reading Comics*, “Cartooning is a metaphor for the subjectivity of perception” (21). Perhaps it is the premium placed on personal drawing style, indeed of handwriting, in comics that makes it an especially interesting instance of autobiographical memory as a process of translation; since the object of our attention is self-perception and self-inscription across different cultural, social, and discursive contexts. I shall not be discussing comics or graphic narrative generally here, but *graphic memoir*, or what Gillian Whitlock calls “autographics” or “autographies” (Whitlock 2006, 966) as yet another variation on the theme of how techniques of translation are implicated in the act of materializing, textualizing, and visualizing the autobiographical subject.

In chapter 4, which is roughly the center of Alison Bechdel's critically acclaimed, densely and riveting inter/intratextual graphic memoir *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006), the author foregrounds the book's metaperformative processes, making explicit what W. J. T. Mitchell describes as “the relation between the seeable and the sayable, display and discourse, showing and telling” (Mitchell 1986, 47). The astute reader already recognizes that comics are a language; this chapter declares that the memoir is a self-reflexive mode of translation, which also situates its autobiographical project within a comparative network of signifying systems, most overtly Modernist literature and family photographs, but also the *künstlerroman* and lesbian coming-out stories. The canon of references comprises Camus, Fitzgerald, James, Stevens, Wilde, Joyce, Colette, and Proust. What characterizes such a narrative as “intra-” as well as “inter-” textual is that the images do not only transact with words, but they also engage with each other.

In what Hillary Chute describes as a “cross-discursive” medium, intertextuality itself is rendered figuratively/pictorially as well as literally/verbally, showing how textual and visual forms and rhetorical strategies interact to make latent psychic matter manifest, as in dreamwork. With her deft deployment of displacement and condensation, metaphor and metonymy, Bechdel makes the reader wonder, in the spirit of Jacques Lacan, if the unconscious isn’t structured like a cartoon.

Bechdel’s intricately drawn, hyperliterary account of growing up in Middle America in a hothouse of aesthetic expression and erotic repression is constructed around her complex, ambivalent relationship with her authoritarian, fastidious, secretive father who bonded with her over books—while he slyly eludes another primal identification they also shared. An expert in historic architectural preservation, director of a family funeral home business, and high school English teacher, her father Bruce died when Bechdel was nineteen, leaving her to decipher the rich but troubling legacy of similarity and difference that defined their relationship—left her, in other words, to translate the scrambled codes she inherited from him. Indeed, Bruce’s closeted homosexuality and the circumstances surrounding his ambiguous death—was it an accident or suicide?—generate this multilayered work.

If in verbal autobiography “a lived life” as mediated through memory is the source text, in an autographic work—because its medium is patently visual—the source text would be assumed to be the same; however the relation between content and form is not integrated, synchronous, or organic in comics. If anything, the contiguity between content and form calls attention to the gap between them, to the space between image and words. Indeed, a graphic memoir challenges the primacy of verbal language as the source material, however coded or abstruse, or conveyer of both self-referential and extrareferential truth about that life. Comics are certainly a form of intersemiotic translation, as defined by Roman Jakobson: “transposition from one system of signs into another, e.g. from verbal art into music, dance, cinema, or painting” (Venuti 2012, 118). But that formulation seems too one-sided for this case. Though there are clearly two systems of signs, it may be impossible to determine which is the source text and which the target, on the level of verbal versus visual signs.



Understanding the deceptive simplicity of comics is counter-intuitive for serious readers of literature who are unaccustomed to having to process words and images within the same bounded space in a self-conscious, extensive fashion. What determines the order of reading of the panels, and how does size and shape matter? Horizontal or vertical? What about the blanks *between* the panels? How are they to be understood? While not exactly functioning as negative space, these blanks, called “gutters,” are also the borders outlining the images. What happens in that space? And, how is that space to be filled in? These elements are—pardon, the expression—graphic reminders that comics, like verbal narrative, leave out more than they put in. It may initially seem as though the pictures are easier to grasp than the text, thus requiring less critical scrutiny, but this assumption does not take into account the density of information the pictures actually convey, some of which might be purely aesthetic or formalist in nature, and not content-driven or plot-enhancing at all. (No less so than in literature, virtuosity is a virtue in comics.) Thus the reader of comics who privileges the words at the expense of the images has failed to understand what is intrinsically, internally translatable about comics; and, conversely, though it is necessary to possess what is known as “visual literacy,” that alone is also terribly insufficient for understanding comics. Comics are dependent on the dynamic, irreducible interplay between its verbal and visual components.

Bechdel’s precise, fine-line, cross-hatch pictorial style, especially her drawing of interiors, corresponds to her verbal dexterity. In terms of overall conceptual structure and design, the autobiography is relentlessly interpretive; experiences presented as distilled or symbolic abstractions are mined not for their retrospective meaning, but for their present value as sources of speculative potential. “What if” begins many a sentence. Critics Hillary Chute and Julia Watson call Bechdel’s narrative strategy “recursive,” meaning that it is distinctly nonlinear, turning back in on itself, finding its closure in reversals, transversals, and coincidences (Chaney 2011, 149). In the service of creating a sustained narrative, not to mention a satisfying story, an autobiography selects and combines the panels that relate to one another associatively (that is, metaphorically) and/or temporally (that is, metonymically), as in memory. Following a series of events that Bechdel recalls, one

of which includes an encounter with an actual snake, a panel in which she ponders the symbolism of phalluses and their creative and destructive powers, leads next to the scene, as she imagines it, of her father's death, which occurred as he crossed Route 150 carrying a large bundle of brush and was hit by an oncoming truck. The image in the wide panel is of lush foliage—foliage is pervasive in this narrative—lining an empty stretch of road with one lone leaf lying in the middle, suggesting her father's last trace. The text box reads, "... You could say that my father's end was my beginning. Or more precisely, that the end of his lie coincided with my truth" (Bechdel 2007, 117).

In an interview with Hilary Chute, Bechdel refers to the entire enterprise of *Fun Home* as "involuted introspection," pointing out that with the exception of the subplot of her own coming out story, "the sole dramatic incident in the book is that my dad dies" (Chute and Bechdel 2006, 1008). In other words, "the end of his li[f]e" compels a psychic and artistic internalizing process of ghostly remembrance that can be regarded as a "retranslation of the self." As I have elaborated elsewhere, translation in such a context of intergenerational transmission, whose knowledge is posthumous and always belated is, in the Benjaminian and Derridean sense, a passing down, a passing away, and a passing over of the foreign as well as the familiar, a living on through others, differently.

The panel below the drawing of the road invoking her father's death shows Alison and her father traveling in the family car (which is a hearse); Bruce's eyes are on the road, while Alison's head is barely visible as she peers out the window. The caption or text box reads, "Because I'd been lying too, for a long time. Since I was four or five" (Bechdel 2007, 117). What is the connection between these two panels? Everything hinges on the word "because," suggesting both causality and motivation. Bechdel's memory of accompanying her father on a business trip to Philadelphia, and stopping at a luncheonette, is a motivated one because, as she says, "WE [emphasis mine] saw a most unsettling sight." Initially deprived of authorial perspective, the reader/viewer has no idea what the object of their gaze might be. On the following page, there are two unequally-sized panels. The dominant one shows a masculine-looking woman wearing men's clothes. Both father and daughter gaze at her; Alison expresses to the reader/viewer

the great surprise she experienced at this phenomenon. The text box below turns it into an instance of uncanny translation: “But like a traveler in a foreign country who runs into someone from home—someone they’ve never spoken to, but know by sight—I recognized her with a surge of joy.” In the panel below, Bechdel recounts, “Dad recognized her too.” In her memory, he challenges her: “Is *that* [author’s emphasis] what you want to look like?” (Bechdel 2007, 118). In the next panel, on the following page, with the image of the woman writ large, she asks rhetorically, “What could I say?” But to her father, she replies, “*No.*” This is followed by a panel in which father drags daughter, who is still looking back, out of the luncheonette.

This instance of perfect translatability—a memory trace in which both Alison and Bruce, displaced from their own familiar/familial context, recognize another outsider not as a stranger but as someone familiar to them on the basis of an implicit, shared sexual/gender difference—is reconstituted as a primal scene from Bechdel’s childhood, and one of the most charged in the entire autobiography. The cartoonist puts a fine point on it in the next panel when she discloses to the reader, “But the vision of that truck-driving bulldyke sustained me through the years” (Bechdel 2007, 119). At the moment of Alison’s “recognition,” she didn’t know what a *bulldyke* was; the signifier may have “sustained” her, but its signification eluded her until later in life. Of course, Bechdel is projecting backward: her superimposition of the term *bulldyke* onto the genre-bending truck-trucker announces itself as belonging to a current linguistic/cultural/political context in which gender identity is understood to be performative and provocatively appropriated. This is a current context her father did not live to fully appreciate, but one she wishes him to assume now. As Madelon Sprengnether puts it, invoking Freud, “[M]emories from childhood vividly recalled in adult life bear no specific relation to what happened in the past. Rather, they are composite formations—elements of childhood experiences as represented through the distorting lens of adult wishes, fantasies, and desires” (Sprengnether 2012, 215).

Freud’s final paragraph in “Screen Memories,” which is an internal dialogue or self-analysis, an example of life-writing masquerading as a narrative with an interlocutor, views memory as a process of construction:

the concept of a “screen memory” as one which owes its value as a memory not to its own content but to the relation existing between some other that has been suppressed... It may indeed be questioned whether we have any memories at all *from* our childhood; memories *relating* to our childhood may be all that we possess. Our childhood memories show us our earliest years not as they were but as they appeared at the later periods when the memories were aroused. In these periods of *arousal*, the childhood memories did not *emerge*; *they were formed at that time*. And a number of motives, with no concern for historical accuracy, had a part in *forming* them, as well as in the selection of the memories themselves. (Freud 1995b, 126)

What is at stake in this primal scene which Bechdel has reconstructed because it comes to play a determining role in her coming-out story, is relationality of all kinds, grounding all autobiography and translation: the relation between the visual and the verbal (between what is seen and what is not said); between a father and a daughter who witness together, and who share a sense of complicity, but then suppress that bond of knowledge and affinity; between recognition and self-recognition; between lying and truth-telling. It is above all the circuits of deception and self-deception that Bechdel seeks to rewire and overwrite.

Coyly titled “In the shadow of young girls in flower,” after the French title of the second volume of Proust’s *Recherche*, the end of the chapter calls the reader’s attention to the fact that the previous translation of *À l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*—*Within a Budding Grove*—shifts the emphasis from the botanical to the erotic. However, Bechdel interjects, “As Proust himself so lavishly illustrates, the two are pretty much the same thing” (Bechdel 2007, 109). That cavalier conflation serves Bechdel as a metaphor for her father’s love for flowers and her own developing identity as a lesbian, unleashing a cluster of critical convergences interpreted from a current vantage point. Chapter 4, in as much as it invokes Proust’s term “inversion,” is about reading generic and gender indeterminacy, but if Proust serves as the thematic intertext, Freud has certainly provided us with the method for understanding how the bulldyke scene functions in the narrative and why resurrecting this memory now is so critical for Bechdel’s enterprise.

Bechdel’s father started reading Proust the year before he died, and it was after his death that Lydia Davis’s retranslation of *À la recherche du temps perdu* came out; though she prefers the “liter-

alness” of *In Search of Lost Time*, Bechdel laments the fact that *perdu* and *lost* are not simple equivalents: that *perdu* also connotes “ruined, undone, wasted, wrecked, and spoiled” (Bechdel 2007, 119). Bechdel’s point about what is literally as well as figuratively “lost in translation” when this source word in French is transferred to English, is a metacommentary on what is irretrievable. “The complexity of loss itself” (Bechdel 2007, 120) is lost, despite translation’s capacity to recuperate and redeem difference over time and even space. Some differences *are* irreducible variants; they belong to the realm of the untranslatable.

The translation strategy that propels *Fun Home*, however, ultimately valorizes affinity and proximity by domesticating difference through regeneration. The last page of chapter 4 comprises two unequally sized panels, both devoted to drawings taken from a box marked “family photographs” that Bechdel found after her father’s death, including one revealing her father’s transgressive past activities with a former male babysitter. (In her interview with Chute, she attributes the genesis of this book to the discovery of this photograph.) The reader remembers the smaller top photograph as the snapshot of an adolescent girl posing in a bathing suit which is the chapter head image; it serves as a kind of illustration of its title, “In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower.” This time, however, Bechdel alerts the reader that the image in the redrawn photo is not of a girl (Alison, one might have speculated), but of her young father in drag, and looking, as she says, “not mincing or silly at all. He’s lissome, elegant” (Bechdel 2007, 120). In the large panel, that top photo is mostly obscured by the text box.

What grabs the reader’s attention is the juxtaposition of two portraits, and their striking similarities: one of her twenty-two-year-old father sunbathing on the roof of his frat house, the other of Alison on a fire escape on her twenty-first birthday. She wonders if this was taken by his lover, as hers was. For Bechdel, the autographer, the uncanny resemblance between the two figures and their two poses—“the exterior setting, the pained grin, the flexible wrists, even the angle of shadow falling across our faces”—is “about as close as a translation can get” (Bechdel 2007, 120). Where is the original or source? What, about the structural or formal aspects of this strategic arrangement, calls up an act of translation, one in which the points of contact are so acutely

identifiable? Obviously, in this visual commentary there is something beyond a merely shared physical, familial resemblance, even across gender lines. Indeed, it is precisely the fluidity of sexual orientation, gender identification, and polymorphism à la Proust that reveals the configuring of father and daughter identities here as a transposition or displacement, alternatively, of a simple replication of difference (which is one definition of translation). Rather, Bruce and Alison are to be recognized on the page as “inverted versions of each other in the family” (Watson 2008, 135). In this particular act of intergenerational transmission which celebrates the materiality of self-presentation, Bechdel is memorializing a connection that was often resisted in life by both Alison and her father, but which is now reenvisioned through art.

### **Conclusion**

By identifying Nabokov’s, Condé’s, and Bechdel’s autobiographical projects as distinctive modes of translation, I have hoped to show that translating a life requires a particular strategy or technique of self-reflexiveness. The art of self-translation, with its perils and projections, is a highly mediated and motivated act of intimacy that takes place not in a vacuum, but within a set of cultural determinants. By wrestling with questions of familiarity and strangeness, assimilation and resistance, appropriation and deflection, the autobiographer/translator and the translator/autobiographer remind us that neither life nor language is self-contained. In their very existence, autobiographies—which are translations of “experience” and, therefore, subject to infinite and relentless interpretation—serve as testimonies to existential lack and linguistic incompleteness. Invocations of other lives and other voices—repressed, resisted, and reclaimed—autobiographies are translations in search of an original. Thus it is the drive to recuperate what may be always utterly lost—because of the foreignness in ourselves as well as in languages—that endows the autobiographer/translator with the greatest agency of all.

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