

## **“What if Icarus hadn’t hurtled into the sea?”<sup>1</sup>**

### **Some remarks towards a theory of historical narratology**

Starting with the narrator’s re-reading and interpretation of her own earlier diaries in Alison Bechdel’s graphic novel *Fun Home*, this essay explores several theoretical questions pertaining to historical narratology. The essay argues that historical narratology will work its way through several steps: 1) naming and describing specific innovations or transformations, 2) determining the functions of these changes, 3) identifying dynamic processes of change, 4) appraising the cultural meaning and significance of dynamic transformations, 5) suggesting causes (in conjunction with other discourses), and 6) presenting the findings in perspective views. However, these steps will not be pursued in a neat sequence, but will necessarily take place out of backward and forward movements, as a certain heuristic teleology cannot (and should not) be avoided.

#### **1. “A Hedge of Qualifiers, Encryption, and Stray Punctuation”<sup>2</sup>**

Among the many achievements of Alison Bechdel’s graphic family tragicomic *Fun Home* (2006) there is one which should be of particular interest for historical narratology: namely, the first person narrator’s excavation of her own and her troubled family’s past entanglements in narratives of various sorts. For the parents, Bruce and Helen, narrative partially fulfills the function of a kind of second life. Bruce, the English teacher, lives in his (mostly modernist) books more than in the reality of his hometown, Beech Creek. His most explicit moments of communication consist in giving particular persons specific books to read. Helen finds her “perfect role” (Bechdel 2006, 167) in a local production of Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* (fig. 1a and 1b). Alison, the teenager, turns out to be a compulsive diarist and illustrator who encrypts her experience as if expecting later forensic scrutiny (fig. 2a and 2b). Alison, the narrator and artist, tells the story of her excavations and, in doing so, rewrites the earlier narratives.

Bechdel’s graphic autobiography is structured around the narrator’s re-reading of past memories, photographs, old newspaper articles, maps, letters, dictionary entries, seminal literary texts present in the household of *Fun Home*, college texts on queer experience and lesbian autobiography, and, last but not least, her own journals. Within the complicated temporal economy of the text, her readings point to the simultaneous ending and beginning which emerges as the *arché* and *telos* of the story: Bruce’s death and Alison’s coming-out, which might – or might not – be related. As an excellent reader, schooled at home

and in college, Alison develops her own hermeneutics of suspicion and suggestion. She reads the texts she encounters (whether verbal, visual or simply mnemonic) as pregnant with meaning towards that final / initial moment, when her father's closeted and repressed life ended on route 150 and her own life as a committed graphic artist and avowed lesbian columnist began.



Fig. 1a: Bechdel 2006, 61. Copyright © 2006 by Alison Bechdel. Reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. All rights reserved.

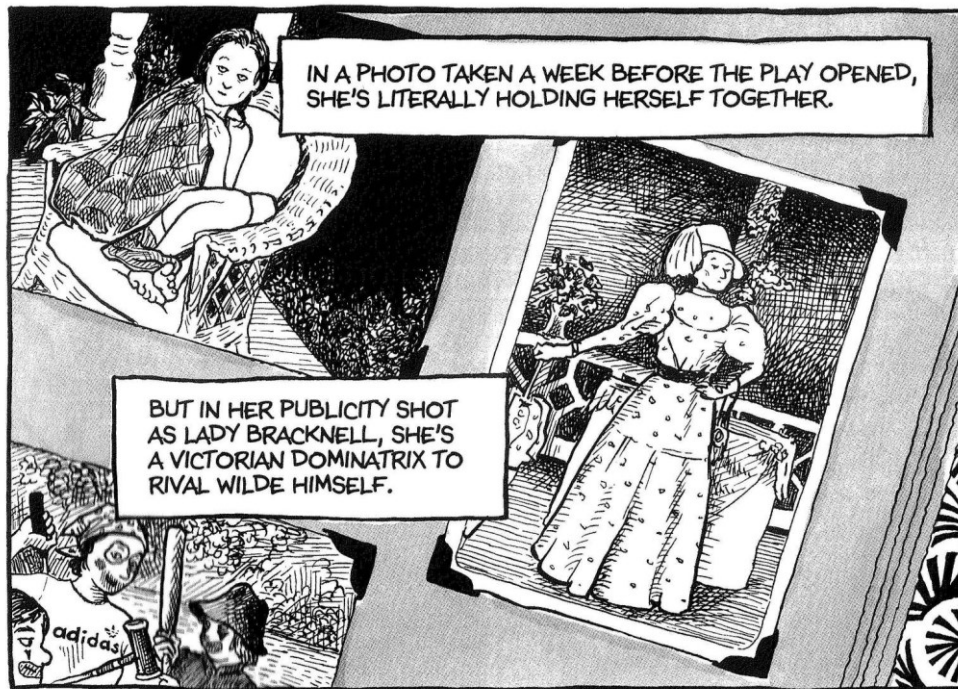


Fig. 1b: Bechdel 2006, 164. Copyright © 2006 by Alison Bechdel. Reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. All rights reserved.

Thus, she selects Daedalus and Icarus's fatal flight as an (inverted) frame for her narrative: the Icarian flight as a movement towards freedom, self-recognition, and self-assertion. "In our particular reenactment of this mythic relationship, it was not me but my father who was to plummet from the sky" (Bechdel 2006, 4). Before Bruce burns his wings, however, he is able to erect a labyrinth

of formal artistic beauty around himself and his family, which reveals as much as it disguises. Much of the text is an attempt at deciphering the texture of this labyrinth, starting with the Victorian Gothic Revival House, which Bruce restores with “dazzling displays of artfulness” (ibid., 9). This labyrinth also includes Bruce’s library (Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Proust, Camus) and his letters. Alison, on her part, inherits Bruce’s love for literature and representation (but not for Victorian artifacts) and records her experience in a carefully kept diary, which goes through various stages of semantic, grammatical, and symbolic development. Her double task is worthy of a narratologist: to understand the hidden messages of Bruce’s intertextual (and interartistic) world and to recover and reassess her own hieroglyphics.

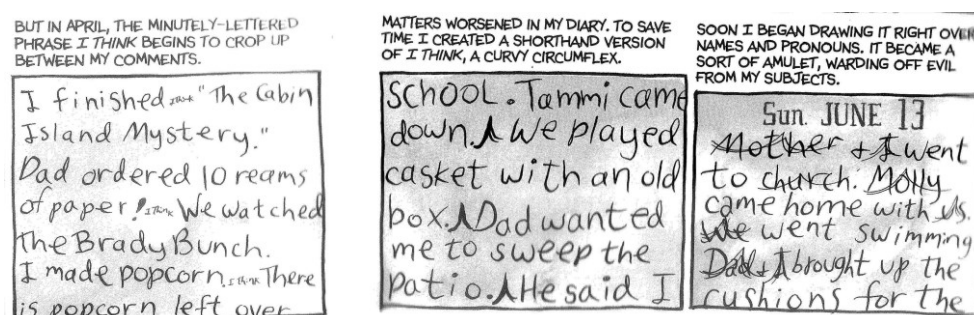


Fig. 2a: Bechdel 2006, 141; fig.2b: ibid., 142. Copyright © 2006 by Alison Bechdel. Reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. All rights reserved.

One time, for example, when she is ten, Alison starts to tag almost every sentence in her diary with an “I think” (Bechdel 2006, 141). In the course of time, “a shorthand version of I think, a curvy circumflex” replaces this act of simultaneous doubt and truthfulness (ibid., 142). The circumflex that appears in her entries stands at the same time for an “epistemological crisis”, the “hubristic” nature of pretention to knowledge (ibid., 141) and “a sort of amulet, warding off evil from my subjects” (ibid., 142). Soon, Alison draws the symbol over entire entries. She worries about her (and her brothers’) emotional response to an early encounter with pornography (a pin-up girl) and the ominous symbolism of a snake in and outside the pornographic image – unable to explain her anxiety. The increasingly widening gap between words and meanings troubles her: “My feeble language skills could not bear the weight of such a laden experience” (ibid., 143). As a result, ellipses increasingly colonize her journal. Later, drawings of iconic symbols of distress and huge letters expressing emotions appear, “until [...] the truth is barely perceptible behind a hedge of qualifiers, encryption, and stray punctuation” (ibid., 169). Besides her textual records, however, Alison discovers that she can illustrate some of her (yet) incomprehensible (sexual) fantasies, which fills her with a feeling of omnipotence (cf. ibid., 170). At roughly the same time, she begins to omit facts and events in her written records or even lies about them: “my narration had by this point become altogether unreliable” (ibid., 184).

I do not want to suggest that there is a correspondence between narrative ontogenesis and narrative phylogenesis. Instead, I want to suggest that the older Alison's strategies of reading and deciphering may be salient in an unexpected way for the work of historical narratologists. Alison, to be sure, does not decipher defunct grammatical structures or zoom in on complicated emergent narrative strategies. Nor does she study the narrative system of a specific time, that is, beyond her private, even intimate family history. And yet, her focused inquiry into art and expression in the Bechdel household confronts her with the same fascination that historical narratology holds for many scholars and with some of the same conundrums: namely, the oscillations between familiarity and alterity and the tensions between discovery and construction. To tease out and explore these resemblances, I will read Bechdel's text in relation to the trajectories and predicaments of historical narratology.

## 2. Alterity and familiarity

Familiarity is what we first seek out in old texts: many words, collocations, structures, meanings, patterns of emplotment and genres of the past appear to have a retrospect family resemblance to the language we use today and to the forms we find "normal". When Alison starts out with her family narrative, she starts with a memory of twofold familiarity: "Like many fathers, mine could occasionally be prevailed on for a spot of 'airplane'" (Bechdel 2006, 3). The game creates a gesture of intimacy between father and daughter; the adjective 'many' signals commonness, an ordinary regime. With Bruce's death, however, Alison feels compelled to introduce the word "queer" into the story: "[...] queer in every sense of that multivalent word. It was strange certainly, in its deviation from the normal course of things. It was suspicious, perhaps even counterfeit" (ibid., 57). The accident or suicide (we do not know which) brings out the realization that the familiar had actually always been queer.

Freudian theory very much informs *Fun Home* (the evident legacy of Alison's college education). The combination of the familiar and the strange is of course Freud's definition of the uncanny. The reconstructed Gothic Revival House, in which the family lives, fits perfectly into this register suggesting an uncanny presence of the defunct. It is the house in which Bruce wanted to be master of his desires. The discovery of the unsuspected, the deviation from the norm, the other at the center of family routine sets into motion Alison's hermeneutic work: the recursive movement between what is known and what she uncovers. As we know, this movement is at the same time a movement of familiarization of the unknown and a movement of de-familiarization of what was thought to be known.

Historical narratology is uncanny in a similar sense. The knowledge that I would have told a story differently (even if based on the very same events) had I told it two hundred years ago; that I would have told it in different grammati-

cal, temporal, spatial, agential, semantic, and perhaps even pragmatic or medial frames; or, that I would tell it differently if I told it two hundred years from now, strikes me as somehow eerie. It confronts me with the discovery that I could be different. It makes me realize that my current register is part of my identity and that, did I use a different language, I would be a slightly different person. It confronts me with my own alterity.

Alison's story follows two reverse directions: on the one hand, the narrator reconstructs her own becoming. We can read the transformations of her diary entries from its inception, through the encryption of her doubts and the turn to unreliable narration, to its transmediation into the later graphic narrative *Fun Home* as a symptomology of changing (evolving) consciousness. On the other hand, the revelations about her father's queerness and the discovery / constitution of her own lesbian identity make her go back in time and read the past in a different, foreboding way. Obviously, both movements are intricately interwoven. I will return to the second direction later and comment on the first one presently.

### 3. Forward: step by step

Alison finds that her narratives (and their techniques) change over time. She highlights the changes in her retrospect representation and names them (circumflex, unreliable narration). Even in this first step of historical narratology (the assumption that narrative and narrative techniques change and the naming of transformations) it is obvious that her retrospective method guides her: "Things were getting fairly illegible by August, when we had our camping trip/initiation rite at the bullpen" (Bechdel 2006, 143).<sup>3</sup> Discovery of stylistic transformation is always already linked to certain extra-diegetic events. Moreover, it is the *escalation* of stylistic changes, which Alison identifies as evidence for a significant caesura.

Harald Haferland and Matthias Meyer have pointed to the difficulties in identifying first occurrences of narrative devices and their repeated use (their example is free indirect discourse). They write:

Indeed, it is often possible to show when narrative devices and strategies occur for the first time or in relative frequency. [...] It should be possible to demonstrate at which time free indirect discourse appears beyond doubt. However, the question is whether representation of consciousness is indicated only by intensively repeated use. (Haferland / Meyer 2010a, 8, my translation)

Like Alison, narratologists have to make a decision that implies an interpretation, historical narratology is never purely empirical. In addition, the naming itself is not innocent. What Alison the narrator calls unreliable may have simply seemed a momentous selection to Alison the diarist. It is the Freudian consciousness of the older Alison, which establishes unreliability. Similarly, one of the challenges for historical narratology is the question whether structuralist

terms (developed in connection with modernist texts) are applicable to pre-modern texts.

The second step in historical narratology concerns the function of specific techniques over time. Is the circumflex an indication of epistemological doubt or mythic care (an amulet, warding off evil)? Haferland and Meyer contend: “It is also important to observe in which contexts narrative strategies appear frequently, to which thematic, mimetic or genre specific problems they give an evidently appropriate answer – and why they appear only in particular situations in literary history” (Haferland / Meyer 2010a, 8, my translation). The challenge connected with this analytical step is the functional openness of narrative devices and strategies: In the novels of Charles Brockden Brown, for instance, embedded stories are devices for (internal) focalization: other means of focalization became available only in the course of the nineteenth century (Klepper 2011, 139). In a late nineteenth century text like Henry James’s “The Turn of the Screw” (1898) embedding indicates epistemological and interpretive ambiguity (cf. Fluck 2004, 182). In other words: narrative devices and strategies may fulfill quite different functions at different times or in different contexts. Without looking closely at literary and cultural conditions, functions cannot be determined (I will come back to this point).



Fig. 3a: Bechdel 2006, 170; fig. 3b: *ibid.*, 171. Copyright © 2006 by Alison Bechdel. Reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. All rights reserved.

Alison’s diary suffers from that age-old “troubling gap between word and meaning” (Bechdel 2006, 143). One of the words she cancels out with her circumflex is the pronoun “we” (*ibid.*, 143). The cancellation occurs at the time when she is confronted with the image of the pin-up girl, first handed to Bruce by Uncle Fred in order to hide it away (cf. *ibid.*, 111) then seen again in the cab of a mine operator (cf. *ibid.*, 113). Her brothers are quite fascinated with the images while Alison feels rather uncomfortable. The pronoun “we” is wrecked by difference. When she starts menstruating, Alison invents the encryption “N-ing,” which later also serves as a word for a more pleasurable activity (*ibid.*, 170). The gap between word and meaning at this climactic point triggers an act of transmediation as Alison comes to “the new realization that I could illustrate my own fantasies”, which “filled me with an omnipotence that was in itself erotic” (fig. 3a, 3b, and Bechdel 2006, 170). Shortly before this discovery, “overwrought penmanship” and symbols of “emotion and opinion” had crept into the journal (*ibid.*, 169). Alison’s shift from words to images and, in *Dykes*

to *Watch Out For* (1983-2008) and *Fun Home*, to comic art (words and images) appears to be a solution to the word / meaning problem. A triad, which inscribes a difference between perception (seeing) and discourse (enunciation) into the representation (which also implies a difference between body and social interaction), substitutes for the former dyadic relation. Truth is located in this difference rather than in a word (in a paranoid reading we would link this triad to Alison's figure of the circumflex). The process we observe in Alison's development as a narrator is a movement toward bimodal representation or "double vision" (as Edward Said characterized the achievement of graphic narratives; qtd. in Chute 2008, 459), an ambiguation of narrative towards an (often) disjunctive tension between image / body and text / discourse.

Thus, conceptualization of processes of dynamic change is a third step in the project of historical narratology. Partly, concepts of dynamic change are conventional wisdom in literary history. Transmediation, as in Alison's case, is not new, as Haferland and Meyer contend pointing to the transformation of narrative from an oral to a written medium (Haferland / Meyer 2010a, 5). Within the written career of narrative, the invisibilization of the narrator in the nineteenth century conceptualizes a process of dynamic change. Partly, these concepts are of newer origin, such as Monika Fludernik's concepts of reflectorization and figuralization at the end of the eighteenth, beginning of the nineteenth century (cf. Fludernik 1996, 197 and 217).<sup>4</sup> Haferland and Meyer argue about the related process of focalization or the road toward perspectivism (cf. Haferland / Meyer 2010b). But, once again, concepts of dynamic change may be deceptive: invisibilization in the nineteenth century takes place in the context of a debate about the function and morality of literature (the realism wars). It aimed at counteracting the paternalism of the text and at transforming the novel into a medium for individual learning (cf. Fluck 2004, 175). Much later, in postmodern literature, a similar strategy (which is now ironically coupled with the opposite strategy: the explicit visibilization of the narrator) serves to indicate the dependence of individual language on discourse and of the author on the play of (inter)textuality – anxieties, which the realists would have vehemently rebutted.

#### **4. Backward: meaning and significance of narrative changes**

As a consequence, the fourth step in historical narratology would seem to be a hypothesis about the meaning and significance (or function) of dynamic change. What does invisibilization imply? Why should it be significant that the narrator does not draw attention to her- or himself anymore? Is it a gesture of modesty, of democracy, of the emancipation of textuality? The partisans of realism (like Zola or Howells) or realist techniques (like Flaubert or James) certainly had their agenda concerning the transformation of the novel, which they advocated. To Howells realism stood for an increase in democracy and

professionalism; Zola compared the function of the novel for the body politic to the work of a physician for the individual body (cf. Klepper 2011, 303-307). Science, business, and the unprejudiced scrutiny of society loom large in the manifestoes of realism. According to them, the narrator steps back and opens up a view of the gears, chains, and pulleys of social and economic operations. One does not necessarily have to trust the writers of manifestoes – but they can certainly be an indication of what narrative change means. They also lead narratology onto a different terrain: culture and society.

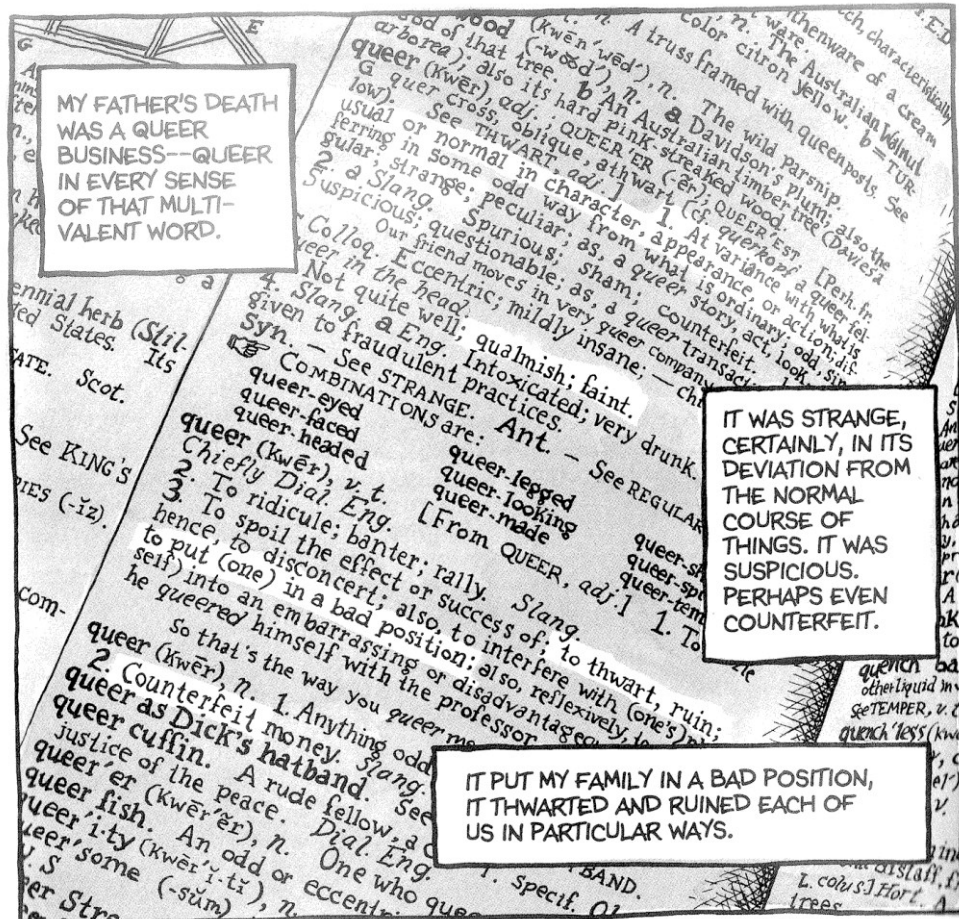


Fig. 4: Bechdel 2006, 57. Copyright © 2006 by Alison Bechdel. Reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. All rights reserved.

If a process of combined or consecutive narrative changes can indeed be linked to transformations in society-at-large, these transformations may well have triggered other modifications in the narrative system. I do not want to overemphasize scientific metaphors; but, in a way, an inductive method now gives way to a deductive method. I can go back to the texts and check my hypothesis against other narrative devices in order to support my hypothesis why certain changes are significant and what they mean (does the imagery in nineteenth century narratives also shift to tropes from science, business, politics?). In fact, this backward movement seems warranted for reasons I have already mentioned: even the naming and description of changes (step 1), the attribution of functions (step 2), and the suggestion about dynamic processes of



change (step 3) are results of interpretation (not pure empiricism), and they need to be made plausible by a hypothesis about significance and meaning.

Clearly, it is the narrator's retrospective teleology that structures the representation of Alison's dawning awareness and acceptance of the unfamiliar within (and without) herself. As a narrator and artist she moves backward before that point in time when she declared her new identity to her parents, reconstructing its formation. The fact that shortly after her coming-out she learns that her father, too, had a life beyond heteronormativity (cf. Bechdel 2006, 79) – in fact, a life that was queer in more than one sense (Alison is very ambivalent about her father's interest in boys not yet off age) – makes her realize that, along with her own sexuality, her entire familiar world had concealed something unfamiliar and important, perhaps even crucial. Looking backward with the certainty that "the normal course of things" was deeply "counterfeit" (ibid., 57), she finds more than enough harbingers of a deep rift in the appearance of things (fig. 4). It is not very surprising that, going backward, Alison detects traces of her father's otherness in his readings and sexual innuendo in the books he lends to his students (fig. 1). Considering the deep fissures opening up in her world and in her recollections of the past, it is consequential that she moves from a mono-modal to a bimodal form of representation. Perception and representation are not in sync anymore. Concerning the comic medium Charles Hatfield has contended: "Whereas first-person prose invites complicity, cartooning invites scrutiny" (Hatfield 2005, 117).

## 5. Teleology

Alison's scrutiny of her own and others' narratives reverses the temporal order of the evolvement of her writing / drawing. Haferland and Meyer leave it open whether narrative strategies generally follow a teleology towards complexity (cf. Haferland / Meyer 2010a, 8). Alison's shift from words to "hybrid word-and-image forms" (Chute 2008, 452) certainly yields a gain in complexity. It is equally certain, however, that graphic narrative need not necessarily be more complex than verbal narratives. Once again, the specific context and the specific functions of narrative devices and strategies appear to be crucial. However, it seems to me that suggestions about the larger meaning of dynamic changes in narrative always imply a certain teleology, a particular standpoint in time and space informed by historical and cultural knowledge to which all the evidence points. Yet, this standpoint is in itself necessarily contingent. The evidence points to it mostly because it is the point from which I am looking. Alison is quite aware of this:

Maybe I'm trying to render my senseless personal loss meaningful by linking it, however posthumously, to a more coherent narrative.

A narrative of injustice, of sexual shame and fear, of life considered expendable.

It's tempting to say that, in fact, this **is** my father's story.

There's a certain emotional expedience to claiming him as a tragic victim of homophobia. But that's a problematic line of thought. (Bechdel 2006, 196, emphasis in original)

As a result, Alison's assertions remain tentative. The form she gives to her reconstruction is consciously mythic. An explicit trace of "as-if" is involved: Alison and Bruce – Icarus and Daedalus, Daedalus and Icarus.

What if Icarus hadn't hurtled into the sea? What if he'd inherited his father's inventive bent? What might he have wrought?

He did hurtle into the sea, of course.

But in the tricky reverse narration that impels our entwined stories, he was there to catch me when I leapt. (Ibid., 231-232)

In an essay on narrative identity constructions, Norbert Meuter has pointed out that

events permanently and irreversibly disappear into the past, but their meaning is reversible. Put differently: meaning can extend the present into the past (and the future): something remains where we abandoned it; the final completion of an action can be delayed; the story is not over yet, an incident can still be understood very differently; it can assume an altogether different meaning. (Meuter 2013, 35)

In other words, there is always and will always be a simultaneous forward and backward movement, whether I reconstruct my own life story (like Alison) or whether I reconstruct the dynamics, meaning, and significance of narrative change. The narratives of the past are irreversibly written, the grammatical forms of free indirect discourse are either there or not there; but their meaning and their futures are open. Like Alison's graphic narrative, representations of narrative change need to be self-reflective and conscious of their own tentativeness. Reading Charles Brockden Brown's embedded stories as forerunners of internal focalization is, in a sense, a tricky reverse narration; but it helps me to construct and understand a longer, coherent process that leads from *aperspectivism* to *perspectivism* and from a belief in the observability of the world to the desire of observing observers (cf. Klepper 2011, 136-140).

## 6. Historical narratology, critical narratology, literary anthropology

I have suggested that the hypothesis or suggestion of a larger meaning (or function) of changes takes me to a different terrain. Once I start hypothesizing about significance, structural narratology morphs into literary anthropology or narrative ethnology: the field expands. Alison links her (ever more) foreshortened and somewhat cryptic entries in the diary ("We went to church. I wore a dress... Yerk! We got the men's fashion section in the New York Times. So what?! Big deal." [Bechdel 2006, 184]) to certain sartorial games, in which she plays a gentleman. She notices the portents of her otherness (in respect to expected gender performances) cropping up all around her: sartorial preferences, images of desire, expected and real leisure activities, and reading interests (with

nineteen she begins to devour books on homosexualities, fig. 5 and Bechdel 2006, 74-76). The signs in her diary open up to an entire world of evidence.



Fig. 5: Bechdel 2006, 75. Copyright © 2006 by Alison Bechdel. Reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. All rights reserved.

In suggesting the meaning and function of processes of narrative change, the social and cultural basis of narrative inevitably enters the game. Like Alison, the narratologist will compare and contrast the textual findings with findings in other cultural fields including other verbal and narrative forms. Harald Haferland vehemently insists (correctly, I think) in taking the conditions and constructed realities of life (the forms of life, *Lebensformen*) into account. After all, they constitute the dense nodes of references and predicaments, which trigger narrative change – and are, in turn, transformed by narrative representations:

I am alluding to the fact that the theory of the novel and aesthetic theory—from Hegel to Lukács and beyond—has always taken into account a specific relationship that appears to play a diminishing role today: the relationship between the forms of narrative and society; a society at a definite point in its historical evolution and, then, also a form of narrative viewed in this light. (Haferland / Meyer 2010b, 429)

To Haferland the material and symbolic conditions of life and their narrative representations form a whole. He fears that it might be misleading to transfer narratological terms developed in the context of modernist narratives (the case in dispute is perspectivism) to medieval texts, and he demands more historical awareness. Indeed, I believe there is a strong tendency to define a more historically and culturally minded narratology. Ingeborg Hoesterey has described this tendency more than twenty years ago with the term “critical narratology”, which embraces critical theory, poststructuralism, and feminism (Hoesterey 1992, 1999). David Herman and John Pier have recently referred to it with the term “postclassical narratology”: “the integration of *context* into narrative theory” (Pier 2011, 338, emphasis in original). I also believe that historical narratology needs to ally itself methodologically with cultural studies and anthropology or ethnology in order to determine (for instance) whether specific narrative devices in medieval texts are signs of an awareness of perspectivism in the modern sense. This presupposes the assumption that processes of narrative change occur for cultural reasons and, in turn, transform this culture. Ansgar Nünning has advocated this orientation:

[...] the more narratological literary and cultural history become and the more historically and culturally oriented narratology becomes, the better for both. When narratology was invented in the late sixties, one of the first things that was lost was cultural history. And although we have recently witnessed a return to history, a revival of narrative, and a 'cultural turn,' cultural history and narratology still seem to be oceans apart. (Nünning 2000, 345)

The narrator and artist Alison, on the other hand, has a keen understanding of this relationship. Trying to understand her father's maneuvers and motivations, she embarks on a historical fact-finding tour back to the fifties, sixties, and seventies. She tries to reconstruct her perception of the gay scene at Bleecker Street, New York, at the bicentennial in 1976 (cf. Bechdel 2006, 189) when the children stayed with Bruce at a friend of her mothers'. Alison, at fifteen, is fascinated by the "display of cosmeticized masculinity" all around her: "It was quite a gay weekend all around" (ibid., 190). Nevertheless, at the time she did not draw any conclusions. Bruce goes out alone at night; but he never comes out into the open. Referring to his sexuality in a late letter, he contends: "I'll admit that I have been somewhat envious of the 'new' freedom (?) that appears on campuses today. In the fifties it was not even considered an option. [...] Yes, my world was quite limited" (ibid., 212).

Alison is not convinced by Bruce's narrative of victimization. She muses on an alternative course of history (after all, there were gay couples before the nineteen eighties): but who would be her father then? (cf. ibid., 197) And would it not end in another tragedy considering the AIDS epidemic in the eighties? (cf. ibid., 195) Whatever the imaginary courses of events, Alison's inquiry into the life and times of Bruce forever changes her understanding of her father's favorite texts, the modernist canon. In *Fun Home*, the often mythic (quest) structure chosen by modernist classics – Proust, Camus, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Wilde, James, Joyce, Albee, Salinger – takes on a decidedly queer note. The discovery of the cracks and fissures in the "normality" of the Bechdel family and, by extension, the "normality" of the heteronormative world of the fifties, sixties, and seventies opens Alison's eyes to the deep duplicity and equivocalness of the canonical texts. From the vantage point of what Alison has learned, they perform a profound queering of the family: husband and wife, man and lover, father and son, guardian and ward, brother and sister, narrator and protagonist, protagonist and friend – they all are not what they seem to be. The labyrinths of the texts, the symbolic codes, and the structural devices appear to allow a glance into a world of yearning and desire from which heteronormativity is a far cry. The modernist text appears as the down-side of the modern family.

## 7. Causes / Nodes

Alison's diary, her micro-narrative, changes because her sense of identity changes. Events and discoveries transform her relation to words, question the adequacy of the conventions of representation, and affront her belief in the

stability of boundaries. Transmediation, the bimodal form, is the result of a perception of the world that cannot be represented without a deliberate cleavage between image and word, body and discourse, space and time. It is the result of an “abrupt and wholesale revision of my history—a history which, I might add, had already been revised once in the preceding months” (Bechdel 2006, 79). What are the reasons for transformations of the macro-narrative? Why do narrative devices and narrative strategies change at all? And do narratologists really need to answer these questions?

In the forward and backward movement that constitutes historical narratology (naming and description of individual changes, attribution of functions to these transformations, suggestions about dynamic processes of change, interpretation of the meaning and significance of these transformations), assumptions about causes are probably always implied. In his discussion with Matthias Meyer, Harald Haferland insists on the threshold to modernity as a significant boundary, implying the responsibility of modernization for a large cluster of changes (cf. Haferland / Meyer 2010b, 432 and 438). In fact, modernization turns out to be the most often invoked cause for narrative change (cf. Klepper 2011, 21-35). Matthias Meyer, on the other hand, prefers an evolutionary model of narrative change privileging gradualism and self-organization (no overarching cause, rather a multifactorial pattern of small causes). Meyer wonders what exactly a threshold to modernity would consist in. Niklas Luhmann actually derives this threshold from an evolutionary model. In contrast to Meyer’s gradualism, however, Luhmann’s definition of modernity suggests that evolutionary changes in societal organization led to a moment when transformations accelerated and reinforced each other to a degree that constituted a point of no return. This point of no return (when discoveries, inventions, innovations followed each other with a speed, which precluded going back to an earlier stage) marks Haferland’s threshold.<sup>5</sup> Luhmann calls it “the catastrophe of modernity” (Luhmann 1997, 683): a moment of explosive transformations that led to a society characterized by functional differentiation (cf. *ibid.*, 707-743). Within a functionally differentiated society, art would be a distinct subsystem and would develop its own specific internal organization – necessitating narrative change (cf. Klepper 2013).

To be sure, other models of historical development (besides functional differentiation) that could motivate narrative change have been suggested. Examples are: transformations in the modes of production that led to capitalism (cf. Lukács 1971), changes in the episteme and concomitant discursive formations (cf. Foucault 1997), a fundamental psychological transformation of human beings (cf. Kahler 1970), epistemological innovations – the history of ideas (cf. Peper 1966), a history of de-hierarchization and increasing individualism (cf. Fluck 1997), and many others. Interestingly, in one or the other way, they are all tied to the idea of modernization. Is Haferland right, then? Perhaps. Nevertheless, Meyer’s suspicion that a relatively contingent standpoint (that of an emphatically “modern” society) determines boundaries, which then makes eve-

rything outside these borders invisible (cf. Haferland / Meyer 2010b, 435 and 438), is fair. However, I do think such a standpoint is necessary.

Meyer's argument about the arbitrary nature of the chosen standpoint of the observer (the threshold) and the possible limitations of the observed field is well taken. Nonetheless, I think such a standpoint (like Alison's *arché* and *telos*, the queer moment of her coming out and Bruce's death) is necessary to produce observations. Without Alison's insistence on a singular moment of truth, when normative expectations completely break down for an instant, it would be hard to see all the fissures and cracks in the surface of "normality" and the concomitant disjunction between word and image. Alison constructs her history of the Bechdel household around a pivotal aspect of its inhabitant's lives and their world: the cultural contradictions concerning sexual / gender identities and representations. I see those contradictions as a node, which connects various temporal, spatial, and spiritual threads of the protagonists' lives with each other, with their artistic (and narrative) productions, and with society's various discourses on this topic. I believe – as a fifth step in historical narratology – an exploration of such nodes can bring us closer to the causes of narrative change.

I understand nodes as pivotal points of contact and junction, in which dynamic processes in narrative, cultural history, and the competing discourses of society (symbolic and material) crystalize. Let me give a brief example: the history of point of view takes a decisive turn at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when experimentation with figural narration (Stanzel), respectively internal focalization in heterodiegetic narration (Genette), and first person narration with disjunctive experiencing and narrating "I" begin to abound (Austen, Poe, Hawthorne, Melville). Narrative is interested in observers: mistaken observers, mad observers, prejudiced observers, and others. At the same time, scientific discoveries and inventions (binocularity, the retinal after-image, the stereoscope, the thaumatrope, the Daguerreotype), developments in physiology and philosophical and (soon) psychological inquiries into the role of the unconscious focus scholarship and cultural speculation on the possibilities and conundrums of observation. What all of these explorations managed to flesh out, was what Kant had anticipated at the beginning of his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781): that the observer significantly collaborates in constructing what s / he observes. This "Copernican Revolution", as Kant calls it, feeds into what Luhmann has called the shift from first-order to second-order observation: the focus on "observing other observers" instead of observing the world directly (Luhmann 2000, 57). For Luhmann, this shift marks the threshold to a modern society (and confirms Haferland's assumptions). If one concentrates on the node "observation", one sees very similar phenomena in quite distinct cultural and social fields: philosophy, medicine, optics, gender discourse, and narrative – they all attempt to develop methods to understand and control the observer. The discovery of point of view would then be owed to a modern revolution in observation (cf. Klepper 2011).

The crucial acknowledgement in terms of Matthias Meyer's argument should be that one standpoint, one node, is not enough. There are too many possible perspectives on narrative, on history, and on discourse to subsume all possible connections under one narrative told. The history of point of view, for instance, perhaps also needs to be told from the vantage point of colonialism and transnationalism; perhaps from the vantage point of identity constructions. As a final point, a sixth step, I believe historical narratology has to learn to present its findings within multiple perspectives and multiple causal constructions (each clearly defined and explained). Here, too, narratology can learn from anthropology and ethnology. The suggestion, for instance, of a threshold of modernity, as plausible as it may be and as productive for an understanding of perspective as it is, should not preclude the possibility of a different, earlier sense of positionality – even if it may be a lost, completely unmodern sense of positionality: “What if Icarus hadn't hurtled into the sea?” (Bechdel 2006, 231)

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<sup>1</sup> Bechdel 2006, 231.

<sup>2</sup> Bechdel 2006, 169.

<sup>3</sup> The discovery of the pin-up girl.

<sup>4</sup> In Fludernik's framework reflectorization and figuralization are not really historical but rather generative concepts growing out of basic cognitive schemata. But the concepts lend themselves to a historical reading (which Fludernik herself has commented on: see Fludernik 1996, 170).

<sup>5</sup> In German sociology the term for this moment is "Sattelzeit" (very similar to the English 'threshold') and it is usually dated to the second half of the eighteenth century.