Labile Lines: Art Spiegelman, Darryl Cunningham, and The Comics of Mental Illness

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> The quirks of penmanship that make up comics have a much more immediate bridge to somebody [. . . .] You're getting an incredible amount of information about the maker.
>
> *Art Spiegelman*[1]

That *Maus* was a watershed for comics is well established.[2] Often noted are its serious historical subject matter, its popular and critical success, its destabilization of genre, and, of course, its winning the Pulitzer Prize—the first, and so far only, work in its medium to do so.[3] Yet Art Spiegelman's autobiographical *Maus* is also a groundbreaking text about mental illness, something that has not been addressed by critics. It appears to be the first graphic memoir not only to feature a mentally ill character—Spiegelman's mother Anja—but also to refer to the psychological breakdown of its protagonist/author. Since *Maus*, there have been other autographics[4] that have featured characters with mood disorders, notably the short work "My Mom Was a Schizophrenic" by Chester Brown, *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel, and *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi.[5] But no cartoonist, including Spiegelman, made mental illness the primary focus of book until Darryl Cunningham.

Psychiatric Tales: Eleven Graphic Stories about Mental Illness, by Cunningham, is a memoir about the author's experience working in a

psychiatric hospital as well as his own struggle with "severe anxiety and depression" (Cunningham 2011, 124). The book recounts the not-unfamiliar story of a breakdown. What makes it fresh and poignant is its form. Comics is certainly not the only art form capable of representing the affect of depression, anxiety, and other mind–body disturbances.[6] Prose, poetry, music, dance, sculpture, painting, film, and theater all have their specific affective strengths and capacities. But comics remains a particularly powerful medium for conveying such somatic states, which it can relay with distinct emotional immediacy, notably through the idiosyncrasies of the hand-drawn line. In the burgeoning field of comics studies, less attention has been paid to the drawn line than to the genre's visual "language." Yet the line is an integral component of the medium, capable of transmitting affect without words through, as Spiegelman (2008) states, mere "quirks of penmanship."

Image-based and sequential, comics has been logically compared to film, which, along with photography and other pictorial arts, bear obvious symmetries. In *Considering Maus: Approaches to Art Spiegelman's "Survivor's Tale" of the Holocaust*, the anthology's editor Deborah Geis notes in her introduction that "Spiegelman, like many other comix[7] artists . . . deploys what is in some ways a cinematic style to play against the linear/sequential: he changes motion from horizontal to vertical; he changes the sizes of frames;[8] he uses close-ups and other 'filmic' techniques" (2003, 2). In "Necessary Stains: Spiegelman's *Maus* and the Bleeding of History," under the subheading "Cartoon Narrative as (Slow-)Motion Picture," Michael Levine identifies *Maus* "as a kind of silent film" (2003, 72). Hilary Chute, however, was among the first critics to elaborate on claims by the pioneering theorists (and cartoonists) Will Eisner and Scott McCloud concerning what comics specifically can do as an art form. In "'The Shadow of a Past Time': History and Graphic Representation in *Maus*," Chute attends to "the specificities of reading graphically, of taking individual pages as crucial units of comics grammar" (2006b, 200). Responding to Geis and Levine in a footnote, she writes that "*Maus* does make cultural references to film" but that "its form is best understood as specific to comics" (221). In reference to McCloud, she cites "the crucial space of the gutter," which functions as the form's "structural element of absence" (221); she then quotes him: "what's between the panels is the only element of comics that is not duplicated in any other medium" (221). McCloud views the gutter—that space between panels—as *the* "grammar" unique to comics, where "human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single

idea" (1993, 66). He calls that process "closure": "Comic panels fracture both time and space offering a jagged staccato rhythm of unconnected moments but closure allows us to connect those moments and mentally construct a continuous unified reality" (67). The gutter may foster "closure," but as a site of ongoing imaginative play and interpretation, it is anything but closed. While the contents inside the frame are optically conveyed, "between panels, none of our senses are required at all," McCloud observes, "[w]hich is why all of our senses are engaged" (89). Sensationally generative, the gutter is perpetually alive.

Yet it is not only the gutter that distinguishes comics from film. In sequential comics, a series of frames are concurrently visible. Photography can also be presented in a series, but, like film, its representational style is arguably less elastic and its image more temporally bound than comics, a point to which I will return later.[9] Cartoonists structure panels to foster a theme, develop a rhythm, and produce visual symmetries or cues. Although in comics we are conditioned, and may choose, to read panels in chronological order, multiple frames always remain simultaneously on view. As Thierry Groensteen notes,

> framed, isolated by empty space (a redoubling of the frame), and generally of small dimensions, the panel is easily contained by and takes part in the sequential continuum. This signifies that at the perceptive and cognitive levels the panel exists longer for the comics reader than the shot exists for a film spectator. (2009, 26)

Groensteen cites film theorist Christian Metz, who points out that film does not present "the sensation of being placed in front of a multitude of narrative utterances" (quoted in Groensteen 2009, 26). On the other hand, the reader of comics "experiences precisely a sensation of this type" (26).

A third differentiating feature of comics to which I closely attend, because I believe it is the least examined, is its compositional style, which encompasses how the cartoonist fills the frame and draws the line. Groensteen points out that comics involve creative choices about what to include, whereas film, like photography, is a medium of exclusion: "The frame of a comics panel does not remove anything . . . It delimits an area offered to the inscription of a drawing and, if need be, to verbal statements" (40). The cartoonist "is essentially preoccupied by what he wants to put in his image (that is, in his frame), not by what he must exclude" (41). In other words, the filmmaker and photographer are concerned with editing an existing

field of vision. The cartoonist, on the other hand, working from a more expansive imaginative field, fills in blank space. How the cartoonist fills in that space—his manner of drawing—establishes a signature compositional style. Although comics is usually discussed as a language, it is, foremost, a visual medium. The cartoonist, the filmmaker, and the photographer all generate meaning and affect through the interplay of the visible and implied, that is, what is in and outside the frame. But each arrives at that production through a different methodology. The compositional style of the cartoonist, as with other fine artists, varies greatly. The hand-drawn line is not only the cartoonist's unique signature; it *is* comics.

These three aspects of comics—the gutter, the frame, and the compositional style—can be utilized in very specific and unparalleled ways in the representation of mood disorders. And it is these three components, particularly the third, on which I will concentrate in my analysis of Cunningham's *Tales*. But before I look at that work, it is useful to begin with how Spiegelman employs these formal elements to convey the affect of mental illness.

Madness, Trauma and "Prisoner on the Hell Planet"

The Gutter

Cathy Caruth has identified trauma as "the *structure of its experience* or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly" (1995, 4; italics in original). As an experience of discontinuity, to be traumatized is "to be possessed by an image or event" that eludes narration and is marked by gaps (5). In "Collateral Damage," Marianne Hirsch notes that *Maus* "performs an aesthetics of trauma: it is fragmentary, composed of small boxes that cannot contain the material, which exceeds their frames and the structure of the page" (2004, 1213). Spiegelman's autobiographical comic "Prisoner on the Hell Planet: A Case History" exemplifies such "aesthetics of trauma." Originally published in the 1973 comic book *Short Order Comix #1*, "Prisoner" recounts Spiegelman's emotionally paralyzed response to his mother's suicide three months after his release from "the state mental hospital" (Spiegelman 1997, 102; all further references to *Maus* refer to this edition). Four tightly packed pages consisting of thirty-six panels, the comic reappears on page 101 of *Maus I: My Father Bleeds History* as the artifact that it is: Artie holds the comic after having been handed a copy by his stepmother, who explains that his father, Vladek, has just seen it for the first time. We then get a close-up of each of the comic's pages, the bottom and sides framed by what Spiegelman calls a "funereal

border" (quoted in Chute 2006b, 207). As Chute notes, "Prisoner" does "not seamlessly become part of the fabric of the larger narrative but rather maintains its alterity" (207). Rendered in the stark, dense style evocative of a woodcut print by Lynd Ward, the strip and its human figures rupture the "rough and utilitarian" (Wolk 2007, 343) felt pen aesthetic of Artie's already unfolding, animal-populated narrative.[10] Chute states that the "heavy German Expressionist style [of "Prisoner"] is an unsubtle analog to the angry emotional content of the strip" (Chute 2006b, 207). Yet, aside from its representational style, the comic makes extensive use of what is not drawn, what is outside the frame—the gutter.

The strip opens with a hand holding a 1958 photograph of a robust Anja and smiling ten-year-old Spiegelman. It mirrors the lower-left illustration: emerging from the "funereal border," Artie's hand holds the original zine page, where the snapshot appears. This doubling emphasizes the photo and comic book as historical artifacts, one a record of elusive happiness, the other of enduring pain. The strip's second panel, pushed into the page's fold, shows a broadly "realistic" rendering of Artie dressed in a prison uniform (an image echoed later in *Maus* by a photograph of Vladek in his prison camp attire). The word balloon states, "In 1968, when I was 20, my mother killed herself. She left no note!" (Spiegelman 1997, 102). Lacking any representative testimony from Anja, Artie provides his own in the form of "Prisoner." Above the fourth panel is the suspended narration: "I was living with my parents as I agreed to do on my release from the state mental hospital 3 months before" (102). Also suspended, to the realm of the gutter, are the details of that breakdown. Artie's silence echoes his mother's. Such silence might be interpreted as an act of withholding, as Artie does concerning Anja. ("She left no note!") The strip "concludes" with Artie in lockdown, imprisoned within a narrative vacuum and the accretion of accusations leveled at him by others and himself before he turns on his mother: "You **murdered** me, mommy, and you left me here to take the rap!!!" (105; bold in original). Nancy K. Miller writes that "if the outrageousness of comic book truth is any guide, and what you see is what you get, then we should understand the question of Anja as that which will forever escape representation and at the same time requires it: the silence of the victims" (2003, 52). Silence is not synonymous with secrecy. And so what is not disclosed need not be interpreted as an act of withholding. *Maus* informs us that Anja had been in a sanitarium prior to being in Auschwitz; she lived with mental illness for much of her adulthood. How much Artie knows about his mother's early psychological struggles is not

clear. What is evident is that for Artie, events that have occurred before and after his birth are experienced as part of a dynamic that seem to have neither a beginning nor an end. In the context of trauma, and the often overlapping, equally embodied condition of depression and anxiety, both Anja and Artie's silence can be read as reflecting experiences that are outside of language and representation.

Although Artie did not live through the Holocaust, he inherits its effects. This intergenerational trauma—what Hirsch terms "postmemory"—is part of the ongoing present that Artie embodies.[11] At the same time, perhaps because he did not personally witness the Holocaust, he can objectify it. One manifestation of such objectification is his preoccupation with dates and diagrams, notably represented by the Auschwitz timeline (Spiegelman 1997, 228). As the first critic to closely attend to the timeline, Chute writes how "Artie emphasizes Vladek's *time* there" while "Vladek insists on the *space* of his Auschwitz experience" (2006b, 210). The "diagram represents a disagreement; the son is 'imposing order' while the survivor, caught up in his testimony, resists that historiographic impulse" (210). Unlike the Holocaust, however, Artie lived through the events of Anja's suicide and his own breakdown. Any historiographic impulse Spiegelman may have regarding his mother's death is limited to one photograph and two dates, and he provides no historical data regarding his own hospitalization. Like Vladek, he insists on, or rather, he is confined to, the "space" of his own painful experience. That affective space, always in excess, cannot be contained by signifiers but instead contains them; it belongs to the realm of the gutter.

The Frame

In "Prisoner," Spiegelman utilizes what Groensteen terms the "expressive function" of the frame (2007, 53). Groensteen writes that "the ultimate signification" of the panel depends on its relationship to other panels, and, when used expressively, the panel "acts upon the layout" "to draw attention to a rupture . . . of enunciation regarding the status of the image" (53). In other words, the frame's shape and size can amplify or dampen the significance of a panel's image and its relationship to surrounding visuals. Strongly influenced by structuralism and semiotics, Groensteen views the frame as a conceptual tool, belonging to the grammar of comics that communicates meaning. But, as McCloud notes, "the panel shape can actually make a **difference** in our **perception** of time" and that "a wider panel has the **feeling** of greater length" (1993, 101; bold in original). The shape and size of frames influence not only how we read but also how we

phenomenologically register comics. Spiegelman makes particularly effective use of frame size in panels ten through fourteen, in which Artie is informed of his mother's suicide. The narration straddling the five panels states, "I could avoid the truth no longer—the doctor's words clattered inside me. . . . I felt confused; I felt angry; I felt numb! . . . I didn't exactly feel like crying. But I figured I should! . . . ." (Spiegelman 1997, 103). The third and center panel transforms the already cartoonish face of the doctor delivering the news into a ghostly skull, lurid and frightening, his open palms out (the right hand bleeding into the adjacent panel), as if unveiling a magic trick. Inside the center frame, above the spectral doctor, appear the boldface graphics, a searing abracadabra to accompany this sleight of hand: "She's dead! A suicide!" Bookending this ghastly image are two pairs of panels: four fairly realistic portraits of Artie's hangdog face (see figure 1). His right hand extended beyond the border, the doctor appears to reach out toward the reader; he pushes the frames of Artie aside like vertical blinds. Artie is compressed, as if his skull is being squeezed for whatever tears can be bled, conveying the claustrophobia of emotional overload. This five-panel sequence of "Prisoner" aesthetically represents—albeit indirectly—Andrew Solomon's description of depression in his autobiographically informed study of the illness in *Noonday Demon*:

Figure 1. "She's Dead!"
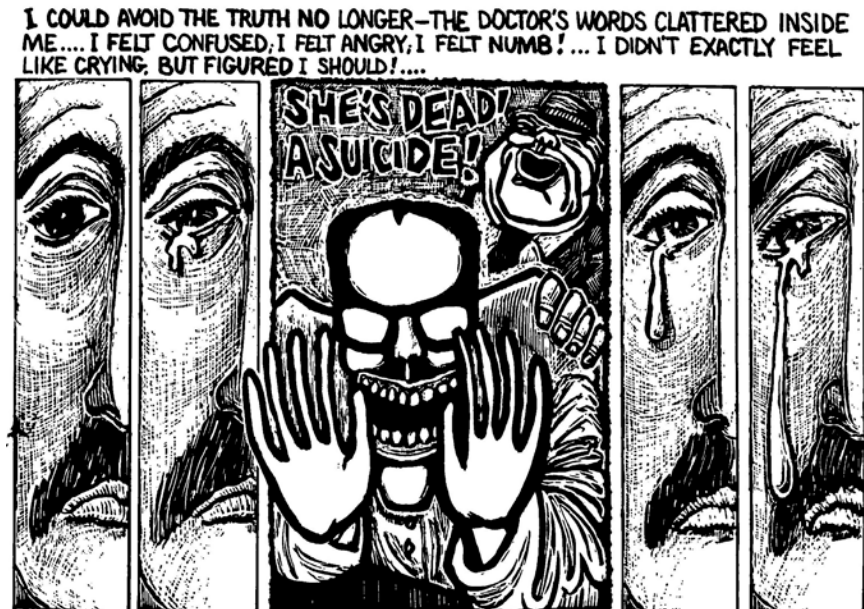
Because this thing had drained all fluid from me, I could not even cry. My mouth was parched as well. I had thought that when you feel your worst your tears flood, but the very worst pain is the arid pain of total violation that comes after the tears are all used up, the pain that stops up every space through which you once metered the world, or the world, you. This is the presence of major depression. (2001, 19)

Although Artie cries at his mother's funeral, the tears are a self-conscious performance. He does not "feel like crying" but believes that he should. His outward display of "emotion" is in contrast to his "parched" and paralyzed interiority. The panel sequence juxtaposes two distinct visual genres—horror and realism—and the tension between those two styles reproduces the internal and external conflict faced by Artie. It is the tension between the world as it is felt (horror) and as it is rationally constructed ("realism"). Spiegelman's use of differing visual genres feels phenomenologically true in regards to the competing perceptual vantage points of those experiencing trauma and/or depression.

In "Prisoner," Artie never states that he is depressed.[12] Yet considering his mother's psychiatric history, her suicide, both his parents' experience in Auschwitz, and Artie's stay in a state mental hospital, it is not an unreasonable supposition. More significantly, and for me personally, the affect conveyed by the visuals of "Prisoner" is depressive, rather than, as Chute experiences it, "angry" (2006b, 207). The rage articulated within the word balloons is secondary to, and in tension with, the anxiety and grief depicted by the visuals; it is an anger born out of hurt and frustration. In his analysis of "Prisoner," Hamida Bosmajian identifies Artie's psychology as "the orphaned self's existential isolation" in relation to familial trauma— and, I would add, to familial depression (2003, 38). Having grown up with a mother who was mentally ill, I inherited a certain degree of emotional disequilibrium at birth.[13] I recognize in "Prisoner" what Bosmajian terms "the orphaned self's existential isolation." I also have known, as a witness to both my own and my mother's emotional states, what Solomon describes as depression's "vacuum of feeling, of connection, of purpose" (2001, 45). One way that Spiegelman affectively communicates the depressive's lack of will is through synchronous frames that de-emphasize movement and amplify stasis. Not including the boy in the photograph, whom I identify as Spiegelman, Artie visually appears in fourteen of the eighteen panels in the first two pages and in sixteen of the eighteen panels in the final two pages. Throughout the strip, Artie's mostly frozen expression and stiff body

suggest a zombie. Only in the fifth panel, as Artie heads home, prior to learning of his mother's suicide, does he express a full range of motion. Elsewhere, he moves with stilted gestures, he collapses into a distressed crouch, or he lies in bed. McCloud notes that the "closure" produced by panel sequence "is the agent of change, time and motion" (1993, 65).[14] In "Prisoner," however, the strip's constitutive parts suggest a larger emotional "reality" that is outside any temporality. The multiple panels of the mostly weary, glass-eyed Artie convey the moribund realm of depression and trauma. The paralytic feeling of the "unassimilated and unassimilable" (Hirsch 1992, 16) as well as an "existence devoid of conation" (Solomon 2001, 45) are particularly acute in panels thirty through thirty-two, in which Anja walks into the room of her bedridden son (figure 2). She appears slightly hunched, her clenched fist pressed against her chest. Portrayed as a series of memory shots, with serrated borders that mirror the opening photograph of mother and son, the four-panel scene is the last time Artie will see Anja before her suicide. In the first of these panels, she fills almost the entire frame, with Artie in the lower left, hunkering down into a fetal position and visually pressed against her womb. In the following sequence, panel thirty-one, she has shrunk within the perspective of the "lens," becoming a stark white specter. By panel thirty-two, her hollow eye sockets morph into a pair of black holes; she bears the ghastly mask of a walking corpse.

Figure 2. "You . . . still . . . love . . . me" (frame thirty-one and thirty-two)[15]

Her void cannot be filled: "Artie . . . you . . . still . . . love . . . me . . . don't . . . you?" she stammers to her debilitated son (Spiegelman 1997, 105). She has moved beyond what Bosmajian describes as "a profoundly needy person" (2003, 39) to that of a cipher, a mortal black hole. Throughout "Prisoner," the frames contain its human figures like a succession of coffins, and the gutters come to resemble the penitentiary bars of the final panels. Artie is physically and emotionally locked—framed—"left to take the rap!!!" (Spiegelman 1997, 105). Spiegelman demonstrates how, for the depressed and traumatized, the experience of time may find a potential analog in the synchronous panels of comics: past, present, and future coexist as a relatively fixed, never wholly integrated, presence.[16]

Compositional Style

In "Prisoner," the synchronic encounter of emotional overload is most succinctly represented through the compositional style of panels twenty-seven and twenty-nine. In the first, Artie walks through the street after leaving Anja's funeral. Repeated images of funeral signs and the Star of David saturate the frame in one claustrophobic moment. Artie begins to collapse under the weight of emotion, leading to perhaps the most visually arresting panel in the work, number twenty-nine (Spiegelman 1997, 105; figure 3). Like the frame in which Artie leaves the funeral, panel twenty-nine is optically jam-packed. Yet unlike the earlier panel, twenty-nine communicates five distinct moments simultaneously, four of which, as Chute notes in her close and excellent analysis, are "criss-crossed by text that alternates sentiments corresponding with the frame's accreted temporalities" (2006b, 207–8). In the lower right, we see the seated Artie further buckling beneath the other represented "scenes." To his left is Anja's tattooed arm slashing her wrist, essentially captioned by the bold black image of "Bitch." Above that, we see Anja reading to Artie as a young boy, accompanied by "Mommy!" To the right of that, we see a pile of dead corpses in front of a wall with a swastika underscored by the phrase "Hitler Did It!" and, finally, suspended above it all is an image of Anja's dead, naked body in a bathtub of blood, with the bold lettering "Menopausal Depression." This congested panel conveys not only a sense of emotional suffocation but also the experienced pantemporality of his mother's suicide. Her self-inflicted death is all-pervasive. As Chute notes, "[a]pproaching the past and the present together is typical for someone considering narratives of causality, but here Spiegelman obsessively layers several temporalities in one tiny frame, understood by the conventions of the comics medium to represent one moment in time" (208).

While a fair amount of attention has been paid to the frame of comics, less consideration has been given to the drawn style—the line—what I identify as the artist's signature. Of all the elements of comics, the line is what initially attracts me to a particular author and work. It is the aspect that I most remember; it connects me to the artist. Chute notes that the hand-drawn line is "the subjective mark of the body . . . rendered directly onto the page and constitutes how we view the page"; "the bodily mark of handwriting both provides a visual quality and texture and is also extrasemantic" (2010, 11). As has been noted, "Prisoner" is rendered in an expressionist manner that differs significantly from the more "cartoonish," animal-inhabited universe of *Maus*. Do the dissimilar techniques result in different affective experiences for the reader? I believe so. The problem with examining visual style as an emotional encounter is that the line as phenomenological experience cannot easily be "read," and comics has been almost exclusively examined as a language. In their introduction to *A Comics Study Reader*, its editors, Jeet Heer and Kent Worchester, ask, "Are comics primarily a literary medium (to be read), a visual medium (to be viewed), or a hybrid medium that requires distinctive reading strategies on the part of the reader?" (2009, xiii). Even in posing the question, Heer and Worchester bias their query toward "reading" with the ostensible compromise that comics is "hybrid medium that requires distinctive *reading* strategies on the part of the *reader*." Similarly, Jeanne C. Ewert, one of the first critics to focus on "the visual register of narrative," has stated "that literary critics, trained to read for textual devices, must retrain themselves

Figure 3. Panel 29: "Mommy . . . Bitch"

to see these textual devices" (2000, 87). In "Reading Visual Narrative," Ewert persuasively examines *Maus* as "a visual narrative," a "graphic arrangement of narrative layers and frames," "exemplified by uses of visual metaphor and metonymy" (87). Finally, in her groundbreaking work on comics, Chute acknowledges the influence of W. J. T. Mitchell, perhaps the foremost visual critic who approaches pictures as a language to be read. Still, these and most critics acknowledge that comics presents, as Frank Cioffi notes, a "word-image gestalt" (2001, 100) that demands visual and literary "skills," often referring to the first as visual "literacy." Even Groensteen, committed to discussing comics as a semiotic system that is read, notes that

> [t]he imprisonment of verbal expression in the visual system—to use Annie Renonciat's words—constitutes a symbolic revolution, a complete reversal of the commonly accepted hierarchy between semiotic systems. The champions of a culture which postulates the supremacy of the written word over all other forms of expression could only take this inversion as an attack. (2009, 6–7)

Of course, I do not disagree that comics are read—word balloons require it, and the medium's use of images *do* function as part of a semiotic system. But they are not *only* read. They are also phenomenologically experienced. Groensteen comes close to acknowledging the affective dimension of comics when he states that there "also exists, in my opinion, a medium-related pleasure" that "is related to the rhythmic organization in space and time of a multiplicity of small images" (10). As McCloud proposed early on, everything "that we experience in life can be separated into two realms, the realm of the concept and the realm of the senses" (1993, 39). In *Understanding Comics*, he asserts that "our identities belong permanently to the conceptual world" (40), yet, later, in the chapter entitled "Living in Line," he mentions how the visuals of comics can stimulate our senses. He connects the synaesthetic potential of comics with the expressionist movement in the fine arts, specifically painters Edvard Munch, Vincent Van Gogh, and Wassily Kandinsky. He notes how Kandinsky "took great interest in the power of the line, shape and color to suggest the inner state of the artist and provoke the five senses" (123). Here, McCloud invites us to think about comics as an embodied encounter. Similarly, Cioffi argues that the "word-image gestalt" in works such as *Maus*

make readers reflect on their own emotional mechanism—on the way that they can internalize, naturalize, and be seduced by a vision of the world. They awaken readers to how images can be used to create a world both believable and fantastic, linked to actual historicity but at the same time part of another realm or dimension altogether. (2001, 121)

That other "realm," the one that exceeds concepts, has been explored by philosophers of cognitive psychology as well as by affect theorists. In his book *The Emotional Construction of Morals*, Jesse Prinz presents data from neuroimaging studies and notes that "there is strong evidence that cognition is not necessary for emotion" (2007, 61). He persuasively argues that emotions are "meaningful" in that they "represent" but that there is "equally good evidence that they do not require the deployment of concepts" (61). In affect studies, Teresa Brennan presents the historical link between sight and conceptualization, and how "by the nineteenth century sight was the first of the senses, and to this day the only sense, to attain objective status" (2004, 17). It "is perceived as the sense that separates, where the other senses do not" (10–11). As a result,

the concept of the transmission of affect does not sit well with an emphasis on individualism, on sight, and cognition. These things are all associated with the subject/object distinction, with thinking in terms of subject and object. This thinking, while it long precedes mechanism, gives rise to a particular understanding of objectivity that is coincident with it, based on the notion that the objective is in some way free of affect. (18–19)

In affect studies, affect is understood to signify forces that connect, and have an effect on, bodies (organic and inorganic); such energetic forces emerge out of "relatedness and not in some dialectical reconciliation of cleanly oppositional elements or primary units," and as a result, "easy compartmentalisms give way to thresholds and tensions, blends and blurs" (Gregg and Seigworth 2010, 4).

I bring in these perspectives to acknowledge the sensational aspect of comics and to shift the focus away from conceptual language, particularly when considering a cartoonist's signature style. I believe that affect, particularly in regards to the "virtual" (those forces exceeding consciousness), and the sensational capacities of gutter, have clear correspondences. Both are understood as relationally produced, in the competing and

complementary simultaneities outside, or tangential to, consciousness but that are experienced as singular.[17] Furthermore, the drawn line is certainly an encounter with what Seigworth and Gregg identify as "thresholds and tensions, blends and blurs." Admittedly, the problem facing a critic engaged with the affective aspects of the visual, not unlike the challenges facing an individual suffering from depression and trauma, is how to "talk" about such subjective and dynamic experiences. Yet the difficulty of articulating affect does not invalidate a felt response to an artist's style. Chute writes that the "complex visualizing [comics] undertakes suggests that we need to rethink the dominant tropes of unspeakability, invisibility, and inaudibility" (2010, 3). A somatic response to the drawn line indicates that embodied experiences can be communicated outside of language, and that comics is a medium potentially rich in the transmission of affect.

Art Spiegelman and Darryl Cunningham's Signature Affect

The stark, heavy style of Spiegelman's "Prisoner" resembles the gouged, ragged illustrations of a woodcut print, a style that McCloud associates with fear, anxiety, madness, instability.[18] It is a style that I categorize as labile, which, according to the *OED*, is defined as "unstable."[19] A labile line can be broken, jagged, puckered, or wavy. A hand-drawn line is often labile; it reflects the embodied dynamism of its author. As Chute states concerning the "handwriting" of comics, the drawn line "underscores the subjective positionality of the author" (2010, 11) and "carries, whether or not the narrative is autobiographical, what we may think of as a trace of autobiography in the mark of its maker" (10). Spiegelman uses the labile line to striking effect when representing Artie's most volatile moments—learning of his mother's suicide, attending her funeral, remembering her final words to him. The depictions of the father's emaciated skull face following his wife's death and of Anja's last ghostly appearance are equally rough and unsettled. McCloud writes that Spiegelman's "deliberately expressionistic lines depict a true-life horror story" and that expressionism is inherently synaesthetic (1993, 126). He refers to *The Scream*, by Edvard Munch, one of the most popular examples of expressionism. Like perhaps many people, I first encountered *The Scream* through Munch's black-and-white 1895 lithograph,[20] which is the version I most remember. In his introduction to *Graphic Witness*, George Walker attributes "our attraction to black and white" images to "the science of how we see":

The human eye consists of rods and cones that process the reflected light of our world. These signals are then translated into color and form for processing by our brain. The rods, which are sensitive only to black and white, are the first components activated in a baby's eyes. That's why infants readily respond to high-contrast black-and-white images. (2007, 13)

As a college undergraduate, I remember initially looking at the Munch lithograph and thinking that it best captured, more than any other image I had seen, the volatile *feeling* of my own periodic experiences with anxiety and depression. The first time that I saw Spiegelman's "Prisoner," I thought of Munch's lithograph; I also thought of my mother. Like Anja, my mother Sadie was of European Jewish ancestry. In addition, many of her older relatives were killed in the Second World War. Never married, she was lonely, needy, and battled mental illness. After giving up a previous daughter for adoption, she tried to raise me but failed. Something about Sadie's unreachable despondency and emotional lability reminded me of Anja's vacant "face" in that panel. I have stared at it for hours, as if trying to solve the mystery of Sadie—and trying, yes, to read it.

Disability theorist Tobin Siebers writes that "the preference for reading is only a metaphor, I understand, but it is a metaphor with a reason because it undergirds the linguistic prejudices defining our favorite critical methods" (2004, 1316). As a writer and academic, I share Siebers's observation. Yet, he also states,

When no language is manifest, readers are obliged to invent one; otherwise, the translation between the "language" of reading and the "language" of the object does not take place, and the object remains unreadable. Perhaps the impulse to read an image is a measure of the desire to control it. Images too complex to be read refuse this control, and they challenge the authority of reading as a privileged activity because they demonstrate a surplus of meaning untranslatable into linguistic terms. (1316)

Concerning my mother's depression, and the subsequent effects of her repeated abandonment of me, I can tell you what happened (and not, I admit, wholly or reliably). But I have few words to describe the feeling of those events. This verbal vacuum frustrates me, especially because the experiences remain embodied. Certain works of art can rouse sensational memories within me, but, often, not the language. Jill Bennett writes that to see certain "images is to be moved by them—not in the sense that one

is touched by the plight of a character in a fictional narrative, but in the more literal sense being affected, stricken with affect" (2005, 29). For me, Spiegelman's hand-drawn rendering of the ghostly Anja is an example of such piercing affect.

Bennett is referring to photographs but she could easily be commenting on any visual medium, such as illustrations, which have their own visceral power. As I mentioned earlier, illustrations are arguably more plastic, and less temporally bound than photography. The photograph involves the effects of light (electromagnetic radiation), the lens, and developing processes; it edits a precise field of vision, and documents subjects at a specific time and place. A cartoonist's illustration, however, is the product of a self-guided hand: it marks blank space and is starkly graphic; it does not require a specific spatial-temporal referent. Furthermore, McCloud states that the more abstract and "iconic" a drawing, the more universal our identification and our ability to "inhabit" it and "see ourselves" (1993, 36). According to him, the "photographic" illustration is too specific to be easily inhabited; it fosters distance. (Nonetheless, as Roland Barthes [1981] notes, photographs—and all visual imagery, I would argue—can personally affect us through its details, or what Barthes refers to as the "punctum"; I return to Barthes later in the article.) Following this logic, the cartoon, the most "empty" of images, provides the most potential for projection: it is "a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled" (McCloud 36). The spareness of the cartoon requires the spectator to do more creative "work" and allows for greater associative play. The emptied image, like the gutter, invites conceptual attributions, in the form of imaginative connections and constructed narratives. Abstract and iconic drawings—cartoons—also invite a sensational response. The cartoon is closer to handwriting than a "photographic" illustration, and, as a result, possesses more potential volatility.

McCloud believes that our ability to see ourselves in cartoons is "the primary cause of our childhood fascination" with them, "though other factors such as universal identification, simplicity, and the childlike features of many cartoon characters also play a part" (1993, 36). Similarly, Groensteen, in "Why Are Comics Still in Search of Cultural Legitimization?"—which was originally presented at a comics' conference—closes with: "Yes, why not admit it? All of us here in Copenhagen, delivering our clever papers, are probably doing nothing more than holding out our hands to the kids we used to be" (2009, 11). In her response to the published essay, Chute finds Groensteen's final emphasis "disappointing," perhaps because of its con-

clusive reductiveness on the heels of an otherwise subtle analysis (2006a, 1021). Yet the connection of comics with childhood seems true to me, although I think it has less to do with postlapsarian fantasies of how childhood may be conceptualized, i.e., as innocent, simple, and pure. Rather, there is a welcome friendliness generated by the lines of comics, particularly cartoons. I can recall how, as a child, I was seduced by cartoon icons: amid the turmoil of my own early life, cartoons were safe and comforting. Cartoon drawings continue to beckon me with their inviting openness. I find them especially alluring when employed in the service of disturbing subject matter, such as war (i.e., *Persepolis*, by Satrapi, and *Palestine*, by Joe Sacco) and, as in the work of Spiegelman and Cunningham, mental illness. In such cases, the most "frightening" images can be transformed into something approachable, even potentially inviting. Through the cartoon, darkness acquires light; suffering can be made more visible.

In *Psychiatric Tales*, Darryl Cunningham renders his suffering souls in a labile style that also captures the medium's friendliness. The autographic opens, in its introduction, with a sweeping vista of an unidentified city and its surrounding landscape. The perspective is skillfully drawn, while the simple lines and bold icons evoke the first page of a children's picture book. The panel fills an entire page. There is no border. The image conveys physical and emotional expansiveness; the winding road entices us to enter. The second page is split into two frames: the first is of a city thoroughfare; the second shows an immobile man standing on a similar street, the wavering terrain announcing that a perspectival shift has begun. Volatility emerges. It reads: "Somewhere in England" (see figure 4). The exact time and place are indistinct; we are suspended within a temporal freeze reminiscent of "Prisoner." These opening pages reflect a deft use of expressive framing and panel rhythm in contradistinction to the otherwise uniform grid pattern employed throughout the rest of the book. The most intriguing aspect of this panel is how Cunningham depicts himself. There are no defining physical characteristics. Except for his legs, which look like two ghostly fangs planted in the sidewalk, the body is all angles and ovals. The face is a rectangle with two zeros for eyes (which, in the next frame, we learn are glasses), a half-moon for an ear, and four finger bumps of hair. (His actual hands are a square with two lines denoting three fingers.) Excluding Darryl, who is surrounded by blockish cars, buildings, and trash, the panel is unpopulated, which is in contrast to the previous frames that show a number of angular humans. Increasingly, I have become preoccupied with this frame. It evokes the abject, the lost, and the helpless. I notice

Figure 4. "Somewhere in England"

the garbage surrounding him: the seeming fungibility of everything within the panel. In a manner notably different than *The Scream*, this frame conveys the isolation and self-estrangement of psychological otherness. The lines are drawn so that the undulating landscape appears to be caving in on Darryl. At first glance, the drawn Darryl makes very little impression. He is even more of a cipher than the spectral Anja of "Prisoner." I initially wondered, Who is this man? Yet after experiencing the entire graphic memoir, most notably the tenth strip, in which Cunningham finally tells his own story, the self-effacing cartoon attains greater power and validity as a self-portrait. It is an absorbing image, and, by the book's end, quite sad.

Psychiatric Tales unfolds in twelve sections (which includes an introduction and eleven "tales"). Each tale explains a different aspect of mental illness. Their titles, in order, are "Dementia," "Cut" (on the phenomenon of cutting, in which sufferers, usually women, slice, or cut off, pieces of their own skin), "It Could Be You" (about the social stigma facing the mentally ill), "Darkness" (about depression), "Anti-Social Personality Disorder," "People with Mental Illness Enrich Our Lives," "Blood" (about self-harmers distinct from cutters), "Bipolar Disorder," "Schizophrenia," "Suicide,"

and, finally, Cunningham's most self-revealing strip "How I Lived Again."
According to the introduction, the goal of the project is to help eliminate
the stigma of mental illness, but, as Cunningham writes, "most of all, this
book is for the patients. The millions who are affected daily by this most
mysterious group of illnesses" (2011, ix). For those battling mental illness,
the book might offer the comfort of confirming that they are not alone
in their struggle. But as a work that is more expository than narrative,
Psychiatric Tales seems particularly geared to those who do not suffer from
mood disorders. It is autobiography as educational tool. Still, Cunningham
wants to reassure his fellow travelers, and he ends many of the chapters
on a note of hope and personal reclamation ("You can survive" [37]; "I am
worthy of love" [75]). Arguably, Cunningham is most inspiring as a role
model, through his empathetic testimony as a "health care assistant on an
acute psychiatric ward" (vii) and his ability to transform his pain into an
aesthetic artifact.

For me, however, the most compelling facet of *Psychiatric Tales* is its
visuals—notably the lines. Cunningham's graphic style, as his initial self-
portrait eventually reveals, is deceptively uncomplicated. The artless illus-
trations suggest the "unfiltered" and "nonjudgmental" drawings of a very
young child. The men in the comic often resemble Mr. Potato Head, while
the women frequently evoke Raggedy Ann. The effect of this welcoming
and unthreatening aesthetic does not infantilize the book's human subjects;
rather, the pictorial style reflects an authorial perspective, one that is artless,
open, and accommodating. It is a style that seems unhampered by either ego
(no flashy artwork) or defensiveness (there is a surprising absence of rage,
self-pity, or sentimentality). The affect transmitted through Cunningham's
style is a product not only of his rudimentary penmanship but also his com-
positional strategy. For example, frames eight through ten introduce an ef-
fect that he uses often throughout the book: to render a panel as the illus-
trated equivalent of a photographic negative, in which light and dark are
reversed. The phenomenological implications of this tactic are fairly clear:
the experience of mental illness inverts everything; life is turned topsy-
turvy. Mental illness disables and differentiates the sufferer; she becomes
a pariah. She does not see the world in the same way as those who are not
ill, and, as a result, those who are not ill see her differently. The effect that
this graphic strategy produces in the reader is not only to see the mentally
ill person differently but also to envision the world from her perspective.

In several strips, Cunningham also employs photo-graphics, actual pho-
tos transposed into an ink print. [21] He uses this technique in chapter six,

"People with Mental Illness Enrich Our Lives." Cunningham approaches this section with wit, whimsy, and compositional shrewdness. After announcing the title of the section in the first panel, the second frame offers a conventional-appearing Winston Churchill shrouded by a black background. The next panel explains that "Churchill suffered severe bouts of depression" (53). The fourth panel continues, "which he referred to as

Figure 5. Winston Churchill: National Inspiration (frames 6 and 7).

his black dog" (53), and it features the photo-graphic of a charcoal dog suspended in a vacuum of white space. In panels 5 and 6, Cunningham states that Churchill possessed "many of the traits we now associate with bipolar disorder": "belligerence, abnormal energy, lack of inhibition, and grandiosity" (53). In frames 6 and 7, Cunningham notes that these are the "perfect traits necessary for a leader in wartime" "without which it is doubtful he could have inspired a nation at its darkest hour" (54; Figure 5). The images of Churchill in these two panels imply a rather "crazed" person. In the panel 6, the hunched and smirking prime minister suggests the comical cartoon Mr. Magoo. In panel 7, the prime minster sports a maniacal gleam, which, for me, evokes another cultural figure of abnormal energy, lack of inhibition, and grandiosity: Charles Manson. Still, the overall cumulative effect is playful rather than haunting. Other talented notables with mental illness included in this chapter are Judy Garland, Brian Wilson, British comic Spike Milligan, and Nick Drake. In his representations of all these figures, Cunningham mixes photographic realism and teasing graphics. As with his illustration of Churchill, Cunningham draws on the affect of facial expressivity and amplified visual contrasts to convey the lability of mental illness. As someone living with the illness,

Cunningham demonstrates, in this chapter and throughout the memoir, an ability to distance himself from his own suffering without diminishing the seriousness of the condition. In fact, Cunningham's lively and mischievous approach throughout this section is reminiscent of Spiegelman's and others' work from the underground comix movement. An "American phenomenon" that flourished in the late sixties, underground comix ushered in "a new wave of humorous, hippie-inspired comic books that were as politically radical as they were artistically innovative" (Sabin 1996, 92). Comix artists were transgressive. Since the 1930s, comics had become associated with children's entertainment. But comix artists used the medium to address topics such as politics, drugs, sex, and, in Spiegelman's case, mental illness.[22] These comix were frequently autobiographical and employed photography to whimsical effect. In chapter six, Cunningham evokes the "underground" through a critical look at notable public figures, a ludic approach to a "taboo" topic, and the use of photo-graphics. The photo-graphic approach is also effectively employed in the book's final tale, "How I Learned to Live Again," which I examine later. In the seventh tale, however, Cunningham returns to his cartoon illustrations of the patients he encountered while a health care assistant. These images dominate the memoir, both in quantity and in emotional force. The use of such deceptively artless drawings to convey the book's dark, disturbing themes is keenly felt. The physical reality of these people's lives is harsh. They self-mutilate. They defecate in their clothes and in public. They pay little attention to hygiene. Their psychological states have undeniable embodied consequences. For them and those engaged in their care, none of the five senses escapes the scarring effects of mental illness. Referring to art and literature from antiquity to the present, Siebers notes the connection between scars and the detail as a source of individualization, discrimination, and sensational impact (2004, 1317). Similarly, in the context of cartoons, the drawn line is not unlike a scar, a detail that marks, individuates, and punctures. The cartoon pares down a subject and encourages us to inhabit it. The few revealing details potentially obtain greater power to pierce and prick. Drawing on Naomi Schor's *Reading in Detail* (1987), Siebers states that the detail has functioned in the history of aesthetics as a "useful" tool "in discriminating between the nondisabled and disabled body" (1317–18). He writes that all "images picture bodies, but the most compelling images often summon visions of the human body, and of these the ones that picture wounds or markers of physical or mental difference are the most potent for the imagination" (1318). In *Psychiatric*

Tales, Cunningham's cartoons serve as a potent tool for representing, and sensationally conveying, the "wounds" and "markers" of mental illness. We are invited in and implicated; we are made to feel the pressing connection between us and "them." If, as McCloud claims, cartoons allow an audience to project themselves into the "picture," the broad illustrations in *Psychiatric Tales* reinforce Cunningham's preemptive warning: "the next sufferer could be you" (2011, 27).

   In his discussion of the detail as scar, Siebers refers to our "premier theorist of absorption in painting," Michael Fried (2004, 1318). Siebers modifies Fried's theory of art and applies it to literature. But Siebers's approach could also be applied to comics, as when he writes that it is "by concentrating on specific properties of texts and images that make them more visible and compelling to the eye of the beholder" (1319). Not surprisingly, Siebers cites Roland Barthes and his notion of the "punctum," drawn from the Latin term, "to designate this wound, this prick, this mark made by a pointed instrument" (1320). Although used by Barthes in relation to photography, the punctum has particular relevance to comics, a product of "pointed instruments" such as pens, markers, and pencils. In Cunningham's work, the punctum—"this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces" (Barthes 1981, 26)—is a recurrent affect. A salient example appears in the first chapter, entitled "Dementia." Cunningham writes that "a return to childhood is not uncommon amongst dementia suffers" (2011, 4). The distorted yet childlike expressions of that section's sufferer—a bemused and self-lacerating female patient named Jill—are indelible (figure 6). Jill is described as "quite young," "only sixty" (2011, 7), but, as illustrated by Cunningham, she resembles a girl barely out of adolescence. Helping the befuddled Jill down the ward, Cunningham narrates: "She had low self-esteem and was highly dependent on others. In mirrors she would report seeing a little girl" (8). When Cunningham first meets Jill, she is standing by the ward's entrance, waiting to leave. Unaware of why she is in the hospital, she cries "please let me go home" (6). Later, unable to complete a simple task, Jill berates herself as a "stupid stupid girl" (7). Her suspended, chubby hands are my punctum. Feeble little balloons, her jointless fingers seem incapable of movement; they are as lacking in agency as she appears to be. Cunningham's gift for identification and transposing his empathy into an inviting icon extends to those that one would expect to find less sympathetic. Through Cunningham's lines, even bullies and tormentors are transposed into hapless, misguided children. In the chapter entitled "Darkness," the belligerent husband of a depressed woman

Figure 6. Dementia Patient: "Stupid Stupid Girl" Jill.

states, "She should pull herself together and come home" (32). In response, Cunningham notes that "sometimes you only have to look at the patient's partner to see where the problem really is" (32). Yet the drawn image of the offender husband's head—a square with circles and uncomprehending slits for eyes—evokes nothing mean or threatening, just dim. My initial anger toward this man is tempered with compassion because of Cunningham's rendering of this simple-minded Potato Head.

Cunningham's forgiving pen attains further force in his fifth tale, "Anti-social Personality Disorder." The protagonist of this strip is described as a "hard case" "skinhead" with "tattoos" (41; figure 7). Cunningham recalls him as "a frightening character who scared me more than any patient I ever met" (43). Still, the only alarming image within this tale involves a series of four panels containing the cinematic zoom shot of a single eye; the eye is cold and impassive, resembling the cropped photographed stare of the murderer Perry Smith on the back cover of the 1993 Vintage paperback of

Figure 7. Anti-Social Personality Skinhead.

Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*. Elsewhere, the illustrations of this skinhead suggest a trapped and tragic wastrel not unscathed by visual burps and blisters. His round and otherwise uncomplicated features are peppered with scars and cuts and a sprinkling of dotted spots—piercing, poignant scars. The skinhead's eye slits could be a man either squinting in pain or dazed in a dislocated stupor; he is a creature as helpless as Jill. The erratic lines comprising his face and head convey an equally muddled mind. His bloated hands and arms, instruments of potential violence, are depicted as impotent sausages tattooed with labile lines; they are not only incapable of harm but also in need of care. My antipathy for such an aggressive archetype is ameliorated by Cunningham's flat and bare illustration of this exposed solitary sufferer.

In the first ten tales, Cunningham is a quiet, unobtrusive presence. His focus is on others struggling with mental illness; he recedes into the background. It is not with an unwelcome start that Cunningham returns as the subject of his memoir in the eleventh and last tale. In this chapter, Cunningham's effacing self-portrait from "Somewhere in England" acquires a retroactive resonance. He writes that "my life during the writing of this book has been something of a struggle" (123). The phrase "something of" is illustrative of how Cunningham downplays his own difficulties. He explains that between the chapter on "Anti-social Personality Disorder" and "People with Mental Illness Enrich Our Lives," four years passed in which he suffered "severe anxiety and depression" (124). We learn that he grew up as a "painfully shy" person, "highly self-conscious with severe low self-esteem" (not unlike "Jill") and with a "social anxiety disorder" (126−27). A

"silent, skinny kid, hopeless at games and below average in class," he had "no self-insight" and saw himself "as pathetic and simple-minded" (128). He took to art and cartooning, but he lacked the ability for self-promotion and faltered professionally.

    After years of unemployment and "feeling worthless, incapable, and hopeless" (129), he turned to the mental health profession because he was instinctually empathetic and sought to understand his own problems (132). While working as an untrained health care assistant, he decided to pursue a career as a mental health nurse. A supervisor cautioned him that he might be too fragile to complete the training, which involved close work with severely troubled individuals. It proved to be an accurate prediction. In the years that followed, his sense of failure grew as did his debts and thoughts of suicide (133–35). As he tells it, he was saved by Prozac and the affective connections he forged by posting his work online, including many of the strips from *Psychiatric Tales.* Gradually, he accumulated an audience and acquired a sense of community. By applying the knowledge he earned while working in an acute psychiatric ward, an experience he had viewed as a defeat, he redeemed himself in his own eyes (136; figure 8). "My time as a student nurse no longer seemed wasted," he writes. "Feelings of failure began to lift" (136). He finds "another way of putting all that hard-earned knowledge to good use, fusing my interest in mental health with my passion for drawing and storytelling" (137). The "word-image gestalt" of this rendered redemption is notable as it includes the first photo-graphic of himself. Three pages earlier, Cunningham presents a panel filled with the photo-graphic image of shattered glass to symbolize his broken self; a bit later, he employs a slow eight-frame zoom shot of his own face. The

Figure 8. "Redeemed . . . in my own eyes."

fractured glass of that earlier panel has been replaced by a pair of clear and smooth lenses that shields Cunningham's eyes. Sight has been restored. In contrast to his self-effacing illustration at the beginning of the book, this photo-graphic introduces a more tactile Cunningham, a mature man with a bulbous nose and full lips and fleshy cheeks. Still, it is not a vision of veri-similitude but of emotional affect. This high-contrast representation of the author is similar to graphic portraits of Churchill and other notable figures in chapter six. Yet this final "photo" series of Cunningham refrains from the comix-inflected whimsy of that previous chapter. Cunningham looks up toward a beam of light in an act of self-salvation; he has found himself, and a sense of purpose, through the act of becoming a cartoonist. As one of the book's gestures toward triumphalism, the image is persuasive. The hybrid form of the photo-graphic affectively transmits the sensation of a dual consciousness. As Spiegelman does in "Prisoner on the Hell Planet," Cunningham pictorially conveys a subjectivity existing on multiple but in-tersecting planes. Not exactly a photograph, and not quite an illustration, the image complicates categorization. The light emanates from an unseen source, outside the frame. Shadows dominate. Hope is dawning, but it feels contingent and uneasy. In that sense, it is a moment of visual realism.

In the seven frames that follow this photo-graphic sequence, and which conclude the memoir, Cunningham encourages others battling mental ill-ness to take medication and seek the support of family and friends. He states,

> A sufferer of depression should not feel shame or believe they are worthless. Look deep within yourself for the qualities you need to survive. Your talents, hopes, dreams, and desires. Because these are the things that will save you. (138–39)

The final full-page frame contains a cartoon Cunningham; he sits at his desk and illustrates a happy picture of smiling beings. On the surrounding walls are other framed and buoyant comic drawings. These playful images emerge from the black background like giddy beacons of light. Yet the com-plicating photo-graphic of Cunningham, only a few panels earlier, cannot be so readily forgotten. Suspended in the gutter is a man still living with a profound sensitivity that has been both his burden and gift. Cunningham urges others struggling with mental illness to cultivate their own talents and passions, because "these are the things that will save you." Comics, long considered an outsider art, has been a refuge for outsiders. Bart Beaty notes that cartoonists have historically "occupied an aesthetically marginal

space in much the same way that certain social groups were—and are—marginalized politically" (2007, 143); "because their chosen métier has so long been regarded as a devalued subculture intended for children, the adoption of an autobiographical tone can be seen as empowering" (144). The final panel of *Psychiatric Tales* reveals a meta-comic testament to such "empowerment." It offers the sketch of a man drawing, which has been illustrated by the represented figure in the frame, Darryl Cunningham. The lines are labile in their abstract freedom; their guiding hand seems to revel in the protean potential for change: lability is transformed into a strength, not a disability. These are not the rough, labile lines of Spiegelman's "Hell Planet." Transform your pain into a creative artifact, the visual encourages us; the imagination is pliant.

Coda

Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues that we "need to reawaken our experience of the world as it appears to us in so far as we are in the world through our body, and in so far as we perceive the world with our body" (2004, 126). A phenomenological encounter with literature reveals the active role the body plays in our experience of the world (Natoli 1984, 199). Comics—with its "gutter" and generative "closure," expressionistic lines, use of shading, color, and metonymy—is more than a semiotic system but an embodied, affective experience. And it is this dynamic of comics that has made the medium a powerful mode of self-expression for outsiders, the marginalized, and those in emotional turmoil. To work through the embodied memories of a mentally ill mother, I have historically turned to prose, writing about my experiences in the form of memoir, fiction, and literary scholarship. Yet, as a teenager, I aspired to be an artist, although I eventually abandoned those ambitions for another kind of markings on the page. Still, Spiegelman's and Cunningham's work inspired me to attempt a comic portrait of my mother and me; in doing so, I realized the difficulty of drawing a successful cartoon: I find it hard to distill our corporeal and affective essences. I tend to draw too much. But after numerous sketches, I produced an incidental image that unexpectedly moved me (figure 9). The lines seem fragile and a little unruly; they suggest the complex emotions that existed between my mother and me while she was alive and that continue to color my memory of her. I can "read" the image. I can interpret her position behind me as a ghostly shadow; I can view our linked ears as representing our entanglement. But, in truth, I did not think about these metaphors while drawing; I simply sketched the image. Any

Figure 9. David and Sadie Bahr: An Act of Imagination.

affective power it may possess is a product of my intuitive hand, reflecting an embodied, not reasoned, intelligence. Yet my "quirks of penmanship" communicate a sense of our relationship in ways that words have not. I am particularly struck by our eyes—mine black, hers pale—and the crescent beneath our lower lids. I am unnerved by the instability of my mouth, the way it flirts with unraveling like a random piece of string.

In the epigraph that introduces this essay, Spiegelman states that such "quirks of penmanship" foster a sense of intimacy because we are "getting an incredible amount of information about the maker." Yet that "information" is not quantifiable; it is affective, and highly subjective. I do not know what my sketched lips or Sadie's eyes "tell" me, but I phenomenologically register them. There is an intimacy in knowing that what we see is the imprint of a hand-guided instrument; every quiver and quake, every scar of ink, is the mark of its living maker. Consequently, comics feels less mediated, and more personal, than those texts that are not hand produced. The

drawn lines of comics are a form of autograph, just as the autograph is a form of pictorial self-representation. Comics reveals how the distinctions between hand-drawn pictures and penmanship "give way to thresholds and tensions, blends and blurs." This is comics' affective strength. Ultimately, the lability of the hand-drawn line conveys the dynamism and variability of its living author. In this way, Spiegelman, Cunningham, and my own comic lines become an analogue for embodied legacies of depression and trauma. Stirred by Anja's cavernous sockets and Jill's impotent fingers, I offer Sadie's fretful eyes and my unsettled lips. Let them "speak" for me.

Notes

1. Spiegelman (1994, quoted in Chute 2010, 11).

2. See Sabin 1(1996, 187–88), Geis (2003, 1, 6), Duncan and Smith (2009, 1, 16), Hatfield (2005, xi), Weiner (2005, 40), Wolk (2007, 343), Chute (2010, 18), and Beaty (2009, 144).

3. *Maus* was awarded a "special" Pulitzer Prize in 1992. According to the *New York Times*, "[t]he Pulitzer board members, like book reviewers and book store owners before them, found the cartoonist's depiction of Nazi Germany hard to classify" (Stanley 1992).

4. Drawing on Leigh Gilmore's term (1994) "autobiographics," Gillian Whitlock coined "autographics" to bring "attention to the specific conjunction of visual and verbal text in this genre of autobiography" and "introduces a way of thinking about life narrative that focuses on the changing discourses of truth and identity that feature in autobiographical representations of selfhood" (Whitlock 2006, 966).

5. *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006) concerns Bechdel's coming of age as a lesbian and her relationship with her closeted father who may have committed suicide; in *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return*, Satrapi (2004) recounts in several frames her depression and attempted suicide.

6. As Chute (2008, 452) notes, it "has become standard" to refer to comics, "like the term for any medium," with a singular verb.

7. "Comix" refers to the American underground comix movement of the late sixties. See Sabin (1996, chap. 5, "Going Underground").

8. Critics use *frame* and *panel* interchangeably.

9. In photography, the light and tone can be altered, but the photographic referent remains the point of origin. Acknowledging the primacy of an external photographic subject—there needs to be an object to photograph—does not discount the referent as material to be manipulated by the photographer, in the same way that ink is manipulated by the cartoonist. I would argue, however, that the cartoonist, working from his imagination, has greater creative latitude. Digital technology, including programs such as Photoshop, has extended the bounds of "play" within photography. This increased photographic "elasticity" of the subject

has given the photographer, and graphic artist, more to manipulate. Ultimately, digital technology may dismantle the distinctions I propose, but it does not challenge my proposed argument for the unique aesthetic and affective qualities of the hand-drawn line.

10. I use Spiegelman to refer to the living author and Artie to refer to his illustrated protagonist.

11. In "Family Pictures: *Maus*, Mourning and Post-Memory," Hirsch coins the term "post-memory," which she defines as concerning "the child of the survivor whose life is dominated by memories of what preceded his/her birth" (1992, 8). Later, in "Projected Memory: Holocaust Photographs in Personal and Public Fantasy," Hirsch refines the definition to describe the traumatic events that children of trauma survivors "'remember' only as the stories and images with which they grew up, but that are so powerful, so monumental, as to constitute memories in their own right" (1999, 8).

12. In *Maus II*, however, his wife Francoise asks him, "[D]epressed again?" (1997, 174), and, later, after reflecting on the success of *Maus I*, Artie states, "Lately, I've been feeling depressed" (201).

13. I have written about my relationship with my mother, and my experiences in foster care, in "Mothered" (2004) and "No Matter What Happens" (2006).

14. McCloud notes an East/West distinction concerning how panels and closure function in regard to time and motion, citing the "timeless space" (1993, 103) evoked by Japanese manga. On the other hand, Groensteen, in line with his semiotic perspective, views comics as inescapably interpretative and that "all the processes . . . implemented within a strip . . . contribute to the syntagmatic cohesion of the strip" (2007, 64). For him, meaning, not movement, is the point.

15. Anja's words not only evoke my mother, but the illustration of her also resembles Sadie, or at least how I remember her.

16. McCloud writes that comics readers may be "conditioned by other media and the 'real time' of everyday life to expect a linear progression" (1993, 106) but also that "eyes like storms can change direction!" (104). Groensteen states that "the eye's movements on the surface of the page are relatively erratic and do not respect any precise protocol" (47).

17. A good example of competing and complementary forces experienced as singular is human sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell—the senses. See Brian Massumi, who presents a series of real-life examples of how in "motion, a body is in an immediate, unfolding relation to its own nonpresent potential to vary" (2002, 4). From the lightning-speed game play of soccer, to the neurological processing of color and brightness, to the skin's differing responses to linear and nonlinear narratives, Massumi reveals "the pressing crowd of incipiencies and tendencies," what he calls "the virtual" (30).

18. It is worth noting that woodcut graphics portray the bleak experiences of poverty, incarceration, alcoholism, class oppression in the woodcut novels of the 1920s and 1930s. For a discussion of these works, along with four powerful

examples of such novels by Frans Masereel, Lynd Ward, Giacomo Patri, and Laurence Hyde, see Walker (2007).

19. *Labile* derives from the Latin "*lābil-is, < lābī* to slip, fall" (*OED*), which accounts for its theological meaning, now obsolete, "to fall into error or sin." The term's use in psychology is linked to physics and chemistry: "Prone to undergo displacement in position or change in nature, form, chemical composition, etc.; unstable" (*OED*). Similarly, in its psychological context, labile means "emotionally or behaviourally unstable" (*OED*). Renée Grinnell, of *Psych Central: Encyclopedia of Psychology*, defines *labile affect* as "[p]athological emotional expression, generally due to neurological degeneration or other complications; may or may not be mood-congruent. In other words, the patient might sob uncontrollably in an only moderately sad situation (an excessive but mood-congruent reaction), or he or she might also cry when upset or angry (a mood-incongruent reaction)." She defines *labile mood*, however, as simply the "marked fluctuation of mood."

20. Munch produced several versions of the work: the first painting in oil, tempera, and pastel (1893); the lithographic, a pastel print (1895); and a second painting in tempera on cardboard (1910).

21. I employ the hyphenated term *photo-graphic* to denote a graphically reproduced photograph.

22. See *Breakdowns: Portrait of the Artist as a Young %@&*!,* by Spiegelman, for other similarly "transgressive" comix produced the artist during that era. The book also includes "Prisoner on The Hell Planet."

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