



A Backward Glance

By Nancy K. Miller

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Pronominal “I’s” are historical rather than ontological phenomena.
—Sidonie Smith, *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body*

But ... one does not escape one’s self.
—Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*

A Backward Glance: I borrow my title from Edith Wharton’s autobiography; Wharton borrows the phrase from Walt Whitman’s prose epilogue to the 1889 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, “A Backward Glance O’er Travel’d Roads.” Whitman describes this time of life as “the early candle-light of old age,” Wharton too locates herself in old age, and I am of an age—older in fact than these two writers then—to know that like them I more naturally look backward even as memory becomes more and more unreliable.

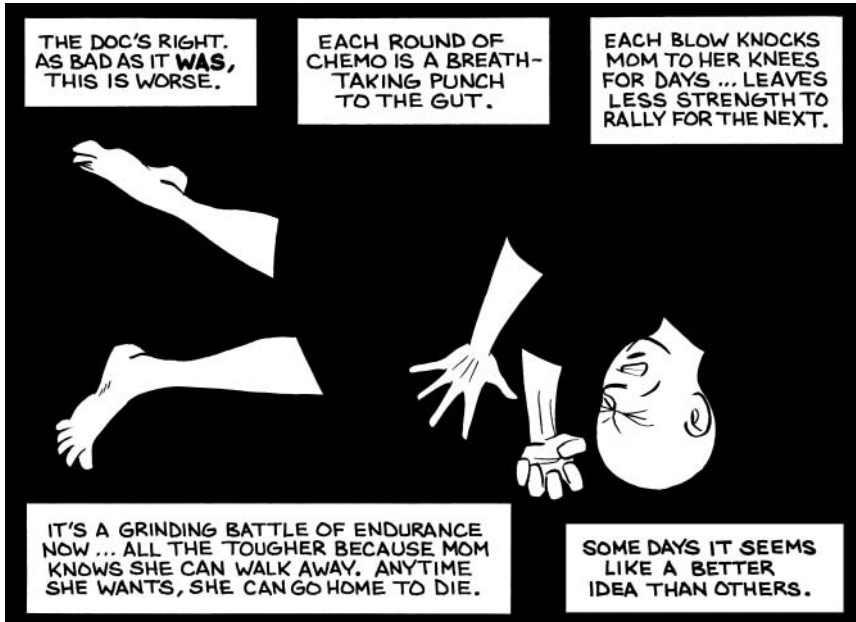
I thought I’d measure the road traveled between the essay I wrote for *a/b* in 1989 about teaching autobiography at Lehman College (City University of New York; CUNY) and the essay I am composing here in 2016, about a recent seminar at the Graduate Center (CUNY).

In 1989 I had recently migrated to CUNY from Barnard and Columbia, and I was wrestling with a talk for a conference on “The Subject of Autobiography.” I remembered arguing that students who had problems with expository prose could find a pathway into critical writing through first-person narration. Some thirty years later came my crypto-foray into writing about autobiography in the first person.

I’ve come out since then as a first-person writer, and everything I teach passes through “historical, pronominal ‘I’s,’” though usually not my own.

The road ahead? If autobiography describes a subject in relation to others (the legacy of Mary Mason) and a subject in relation to other readers, the mode that has come to rivet me is the graphic illness memoir.

Here's a page from Brian Fies's award-winning *Mom's Cancer*. Fies represents his mother's experience with lung cancer through images like this one that almost don't require words.



The image of a body anatomized by pain shocks the eyes. It moves readers to acknowledge the demand for empathy that the illness of a significant other will make. We may find it hard to avert our gaze from a future we do not wish for ourselves, the road we'd prefer never to travel.

The graphic memoir is just one way to preview this existential, relational situation. One of the earliest instances of illness memoir, Simone de Beauvoir's *A Very Easy Death*, vividly narrates the anguished trajectory of her mother's terminal cancer: a body ravaged by suffering, a daughter's witness.

Does the visual awaken the reader's empathy beyond the effects of prose narrative? Without creating a false binary, I want to suggest that locating the graphic form in relation to the memoir genre as we know it expands the domain of nonfiction representation.¹ Fies's drawing of a body falling to pieces literalizes linguistic metaphors from an unfair boxing match, evoking the pummeling the body must absorb in treatment.

Beyond words but in sync with them, the image leads us into the darkness of cancer nights. The white, detached body parts stand out starkly against the

black. The mother's head is detached from her body at an improbable angle that exaggerates the severance of mind from body as well as its connection. The stylized features of the face show the grimace of pain that might belong to anyone and with whom we might therefore identify.² Paradoxically, the entwined de-individualization and disproportionality produced by comics language increases, not decreases, the power of horror.³ Put another way, the estrangement that comics performs on conventional realism forces us to acknowledge the accepted violence of conventional medicine. The interaction of word and image within the single panel, the space of a single page, urges us to stop at the threshold of suffering's abyss and contemplate the distortion created by extreme pain.

Candles

One of the dominant metaphors of *A Very Easy Death* is the euphemized image of what an easeful death might look like.

"The doctors said she would go out like a candle: it wasn't like that at all," said my sister, sobbing.

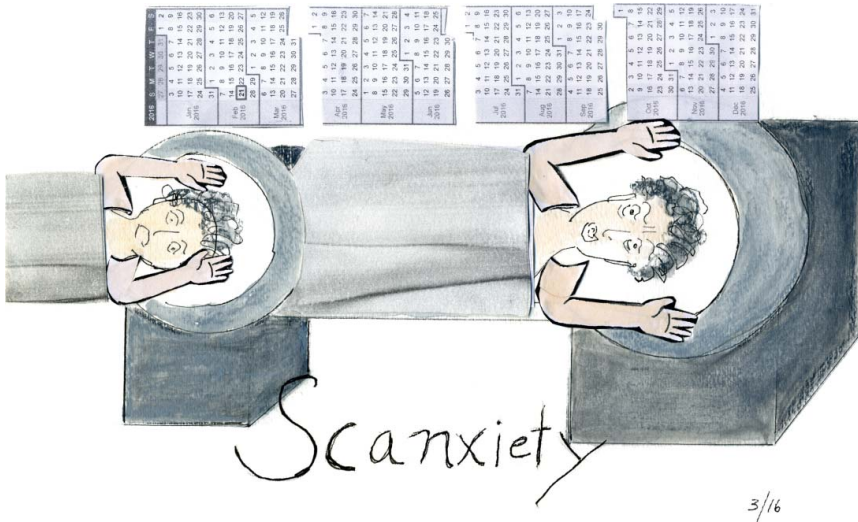
"But, Madame," replied the nurse, "I assure you it was a very easy death."
(88)

Death rarely is easeful, no more than the illness that precedes it. But death also underlies the life at work in autobiography.

In one of the more famous quotations about autobiography, the poet Paul Valéry quipped that there is "no theory that is not a fragment, carefully prepared, of some autobiography."⁴ While my comments about the graphic illness memoir lay no claim to high theory, they are, to be sure, fragments of my autobiography, my journey as a critic. Late-life illness has brought me to the domain of graphic medicine, an emerging field of medical humanities, located at the intersection of comics and narrative medicine. As befits a new interdisciplinary endeavor, the founding group has announced its entrance into the world with a manifesto: the *Graphic Medicine Manifesto*. Graphic medicine, Ian Williams explains, explores the "myriad ways that health and disease can be represented in graphic form," comics' historically democratic communicability (Czerwiec, et al., "Introduction" 3). "We want our work," Kimberly Myers argues, "to challenge accepted conventions of scholarship, merging the personal with the pedagogical, the subjective with the objective—the image with the text!" (Czerwiec, et al., "Introduction" 3).

Manifestos, by definition, offer hopes and blueprints for change in the future—social, political, artistic. It's too soon to tell whether the comics engaged with the graphic medicine project will bring those transformations into being, but I, for one, have found a place for the drawings my

illness unexpectedly urged upon me, yet another critical pathway in the first person.



The Graduate Center, CUNY

Notes

1. Considering graphic and prose memoirs together is an instance of what Tahneer Oksman and I call, expansive reading is a practice of looking at comics alongside narrative and nonnarrative works composed in other mediums, with a focus on modalities of representation.
2. Scott McCloud argues that the “cartoon is a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled. . . . We don’t just observe the cartoon, we become it” (36).
3. In analyzing Marjane Satrapi’s black-and-white aesthetic for *Persepolis*, Hilary Chute describes the capacity of comics “to stylize and to literalize” at the same time and emphasizes the “dramatic force” created by the “disproportions of expressionism” (158).
4. I’ve always been curious about this often-quoted passage’s origin, and finally, thanks to a footnote in a recent academic work, *The Writing Cure: Literature and Medicine in Context*, I’ve located it. The sentence, by Gygas, reads, “En vérité, il n’est pas de théorie qui ne soit un fragment, soigneusement préparé, de quelque autobiographie” (1320), and for the first time I can see its context. Valéry argues here that poetry and abstract thinking are not distinct entities opposed to each other in a false binary. Rather, both emerge from the same source, the self—both are forms of creativity. Two paragraphs later, Valéry emphasizes the intimacy, if not identity, between the poet and the logician and makes the claim, very much like Montaigne and Sartre, that “if each man cannot live a quantity of lives other than his own, he could not live his own life” (1320). This supports my

argument about reading graphic memoir, seeing in another's suffering not merely the bond but the condition of one's own humanity.

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Disclosure Statement

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