

The Trap of Levity in Autobiographical Graphic Novel

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The autobiographical self takes itself seriously, and hence, an act of flouting the idea of a serious, grandiose self through caricatured self-images and descriptions full of self-ironies marks the crucial point of departure for comics-autobiographies or, to use Whitlock's phrase, "autographics" (966) from conventional autobiographies. A graphic autobiography, however, is a word-image cluster or, in other words, uses a verbal-visual medium to communicate with the reader. Along with the visual distortion portrayed through its images the hybrid medium of words-and-images frequently underscores the banality, the humdrumness of the self, undercutting the already mentioned gravity that a conventionally written autobiography essentially associates with the 'self' it puts into the centre of the narrative. For a writer/ creator of autobiographical comics this critical departure is intentional and may well be a part of an authorial strategy to lure the reader into a trap of triviality and levity before overwhelming her with the weight of stories of suffering and trauma as experienced by the author/creator of the work. This paper seeks to show how an elaborate trap of levity is laid for a reader to walk into the writer's/ creator's emotional quagmire catching the unsuspecting reader unaware of the gravity of her undertaking. The reader can so easily be gullible in this case because graphics, often understood interchangeably with comics, are generally "associated with adolescence" (Said i) and are thereby supposed to be a relatively easy reading. Although the trap of levity is set with an apparent ease, there is no way one can overlook the subversive potentials of levity. A brief look into the possibilities and hidden capacity of levity is essential for understanding the primary argument of this paper.

Heather Diack's essay "The Gravity of Levity: Humour as Conceptual Critique" (2012) foregrounds the significance of levity by pointing out the connection between humour, laughter, joke, comic on the one hand and thought and philosophy on the other. Although Heather's primary concern lies with art-history and its lack of interest in incorporating the standards of humour and levity while forming its critical canon, her effort at drawing attention

to the kinship between levity and whatever appears to be solemn is easily adoptable in our cause, which is to find out the quintessential formulae for autobiographical graphic novel's success in terms of popularity and acceptance among readers who would not probably otherwise venture into the task of reading a solemn autobiography. Diack quotes Walter Benjamin, Simon Critchley and Ludwig Wittgenstein to back her point as these three philosophers connect humour to thought and philosophy. Walter Benjamin, Diack writes, "noted that 'there is no better starting point for thought than laughter'" (75). Critchley, as Diack tells us, "suggested that laughter can even be described as the catalyst to, and the very movement of philosophy" (75). As for Wittgenstein, he famously imagined a book of philosophy that would be composed entirely of jokes" (Diack 75). In the similar vein Diack also quotes Freud's remark that "Jokes have not received nearly as much philosophical consideration as they deserve in view of the part they play in our mental life" (75). Diack surmises that a probable reason behind this chronic apathy of the critical mainstream toward humour can be humour's irrepressibility and its propensity for "uncertain eruptions" (75) or, in other words, its untamed predisposition. The cause behind the expulsion of humour and levity from the serious conversations on art and philosophy can be investigated on another occasion, but the helpful point that Diack's essay makes is that levity has a hidden connection with whatever serious and philosophical strains of thought encompass mortal existence. If the idea of 'levity' connects to the caricatured images and volleys of self-irony in a graphic autobiography, the 'serious' definitely attaches itself with the content of suffering and trauma that is presented through such graphic autobiographies. But laying the trap is not the only function of humour in a comics autobiography. Humour's role in this genre calls for farther scrutiny.

On basis of the above mentioned philosophers' views on the significance of humor it can be agreed upon that not only does humour have the capacity to represent a subject as solemn and grave as autobiography, but humour may have other critical function too. For instance, humour can add a perspective on the genre of autobiography itself by—to quote Critchley again—inviting us "to become philosophical spectators upon our own lives" (qtd. in Diack 75). This comment by Critchley on humour's capacity to enable one to cast an inward gaze at one's life takes us farther close to our investigation on why or how levity proves an effective trap for the reader of a graphic autobiography. Critchley's remark implies that levity not only has a certain kinship with seriousness but is also capable of creating a split in the narrative perspective of the author/ creator of a graphic biography enabling the author/ creator to look into her own life

with a detached perspective. Humour and levity, thus, are not only allies to the visually humorous contents of a graphic autobiography but also to the narratological strategies of the genre. This rift that, according to Critchley, humour causes between the author's/ creator's spectator-self and the self who lived through the experiences is also a quintessential requirement of the genre autobiography in general, as pointed out by Georges Gusdorf, one of the leading theorists on autobiography. Autobiography, according to Gusdorf, "requires a man to take a distance with regard to himself in order to reconstitute himself in the focus of his special unity and identity across time" (35). Humour and levity thus serve the twin purpose of laying the trap (for the reader to come on board braving the solemnity of the autobiographical genre) as well as of offering the writer of the autobiographical graphic narrative with a detached perspective on her own self. The caricature employed upon the visually constructed self of a comics autobiography, however, not only effects a detachment in the author's/ creator's perspective, but also by caricaturing one's own self with image, and by employing self-irony the comics autobiographer forges a self-image which is altogether new. The self-image built in a comics autobiography by its author/ creator differs from the 'self' constructed in a conventionally written autobiography, as the former, in strong contrast to the latter, is often more comic and banal. This "cartoon self-image", as it is categorized by Charles Hatfield, one of the foremost theorists of the graphic genre, is different in a crucially functional way of the genre, as this self-image "seems to offer a unique way for the artist [author/ creator] to recognize and externalize his or her subjectivity" (Hatfield 115). The humour thus employed by the author/ creator of a comics autobiography serves the dual function of luring the reader into a trap where she unknowingly embarks upon a trip down the author's/ creator's emotional past on the one hand, whereas on the other humour endows the author/ creator—as inferred from what Critchley and Hatfield said—with a better scope to create a split in her perspective so as to forge a new cartoon self-image for the narrative.

The idea of the presence of a trap within the author's/ creator's invitation to the prospective reader of a graphic or, to look at it in another way, within the process itself of reading a comics autobiography can be inferred from what Art Spiegelman says about the dynamics of reading while commenting on his canonical graphic creation, *Maus*. Here Spiegelman argues that the drawings of a graphic narrative lures the "looker" part of a reader at first. But the drawings aren't supposed to stunt the reader into this state of "looker" or stall her progress to the next stage. "I didn't want people to get too interested in the drawings", writes Spiegelman. The idea of Spiegelman is to arrest the initial attention of the reader with the images, and then steer them

to a path of improvement from being a “looker” to a “reader”: “So by not focusing you too hard on these people you’re forced back into your role as a reader rather than looker” (qtd. in Whitlock 968). The use of the expression “forced back” gives us a clue as to the manipulation of the reader by the author/ creator to the latter’s advantage. It goes without saying that the role of a reader is considerably more demanding than that of a looker, as Whitlock expands Spiegelman’s artistic credo pointing out how “[t]he work of closure draws the passive ‘looker’ into the engagement (and demands) of reading” (968). McCloud also touches upon the point of involvement of the viewer of the images through “distinctive devices, vocabulary, and grammar” (Whitlock 969). The task of the reader of a graphic narrative becomes especially distinct due to the reader’s frequent exposure to the chore of dealing with the closure that pops up with each confined panel of a drawing. The framed panels of comics “fractures both time and space” (Whitlock 970). As a result of that the reader is assigned the continuous task of connecting all the broken pictures and “mentally construct a continuous, unified reality” (McCloud qtd. in Whitlock 970). The reader thereby becomes more of a “collaborator” through her act of reading (Whitlock 969). Because the panels, each complete on its own in a unique way, thus offer a disjointed narrative the act of “reading comics [becomes] a tension-filled experience” (Hatfield xiii). Comics, according to Hatfield, “offer[s] a form of reading that resists coherence, a form at once seductively visual and radically fragmented” (969). All these go on to back the point that there is an intentional ploy employed by the author/ creator to lure the reader onto the more arduous task of active engagement, something that a reader of comic book may not suspect at the onset. A graphic autobiography may also engage the emotional faculty of a reader in a way that is more demanding than is suspected by the reader, given the history of the comic books with its superheroes and other lighter engagements. A graphic autobiography demands the reader to delve into the psychological world of the author/ creator. This world, in most cases of comics autobiographies, is a world of trauma and other forms of suffering. The use of graphic images here serves a crucial function, because images in a graphic autobiography may relate directly to the experience of trauma, and to understand this relation we need to understand the fundamentals of communication through images.

The value of images in a graphic narrative can in no way be discounted, because images in a graphic narrative work as effective vehicles of communication between the author/ creator and the reader by invoking certain commonalities in experiences between the parties. “Comprehension of an image”, writes Will Eisner, “requires a commonality of experience... An interaction has to develop because the artist is evoking images stored in the minds of both

parties” (*Sequential* 13). As a matter of fact, McCloud would go as far as to assert that “cartoon imagery possesses universality”, although Whitlock would take this claim of universality with a bit of a caution keeping in mind the cartoon-wars that the world recently saw (Whitlock 976). Marianne Hirsch, however, draws our attention to the farther complex association between the words and the images in a comic book and invokes the idea of “binocularity” (1212), a concept used to describe some of the techniques of Beckett. According to Hirsch the words and images in a comic narrative interchange their roles while operating, and as a result of that comics are biocular texts:

With words always already functioning as images and images asking to be read as much as seen, comics are biocular texts par excellence. Asking us to read back and forth between images and words, comics reveal the visuality and thus the materiality of words and the discursivity and narrativity of images. (1213)

Hirsch’s interpretation of the operation of the word-image medium of a comics narrative puts farther burden on the reader of the genre, because the task of reading no longer remains the same as experienced in case of a conventional reading of texts. The significance of images in a graphic narrative, however, doesn’t remain confined to how they mediate the act of reading, because images in a graphic narrative can express emotional contents that are not easy to convey in words alone. According to Hillary Chute, images in a graphic narrative are significant for another reason: the combination of the visual-verbal can represent experiences that are primarily of “unspeakable or unrepresentable nature” (in Kunka 2), for instance traumatic experience. “...the combination of visual and verbal elements of comics”, elaborates Andrew J. Kunka, “can make such experiences [traumatic experiences] visible to the reader” (2). The bond forged between this word-image narrative medium and trauma in a graphic narrative can be anticipated if we see how trauma or traumatic experience also lacks a language of expression and gropes for a mode that can adequately communicate its presence to its bearer.

In the introduction to her seminal work on trauma, *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), Cathy Caruth maintains that trauma always seeks to convey its presence in a language of its own (1-9). Taking her cues from Freud’s re-telling of an episode from Tasso’s epic, *Jerusalem Liberated*, where Tancred, having killed his beloved Clorinda by mistake, is revisited by dead Clorinda’s lamenting voice reenacting Tancred’s deed of killing Clorinda. This traumatic sensation in Tancred of having to see the moment of a painful event (The killing of Clorinda) reenact in his imagination is rigorously examined by Caruth as a starting point for her trauma

theory. Caruth explains that the existence of the trauma remains either half-known or unrecognizable to the bearer of the trauma (Tancred in this case). This grey territory between knowing and not knowing, Caruth holds, shows us a common ground for both psychoanalysis and literature, making the study of trauma very much within the purview of literary studies. Just as a *leit motif* keeps reappearing in veiled or metaphorical forms in a literary text, Trauma—being “much more than a pathology” (4)—never completely heals and keeps reappearing before its bearer, *albeit* in ways that are hardly recognizable, because traumatic sensibilities seek to communicate with its bearer through action or language unfamiliar to all. Caruth argues that the language that trauma translates itself into is “always somehow literary: a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding” (Caruth 5). In its insistence for a mode of expression unique to it alone, trauma conjectures an affinity to graphic narration, which too with its word-image biocularity claims to have a unique mode of expressing lived experiences. Frederick Byrn Kohlert draws attention to the “largely visual memories associated with trauma”, as a result of which the “narrativizing potential” of the word-image medium of comics autobiography appears to be a favorable means “to assert agency for the victim of trauma” (qtd. in Kunka 84). Kohlert also underlines another point of convergence for the graphic narrative and the traumatic experience, which is their association with fragmentation. Traumatic memory is fragmentary and visual, whereas graphic narrative also has a “fragmented, visual nature” due to its closed individual panels linked by gutters (Kunka 84). As a result of this an expression of traumatic experiences suits the comics autobiographical form, explaining “the pervasiveness of traumatic narratives in autobiographical comics” (Kunka 84).

Despite the above mentioned connection between trauma and autobiographical graphic narratives, commentators like Hatfield, are troubled by the fact that “...comics, with their hybrid, visual-verbal nature, pose an immediate and obvious challenge to the idea of ‘nonfiction’” (112). The great number of autobiographical graphic narratives that came out just within the first two decades of this century alone stands invalidating this doubt though. Perhaps, perceiving the caricatured/ humorous contents of a graphic autobiography as part of an artistic trap (of levity) can help us recognize the gravity of the genre.

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