Desire, Curiosity, and the Search for Truth in Proust, Moreno, and Bechdel

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The Graduate Center, City University of New York
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by

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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

Marcel Proust’s influence on twentieth century literature is broad and has been well documented. This dissertation attempts a comparative reading of À la recherche du temps perdu that places it in contrast with Colombian writer Marvel Moreno’s 1987 novel, En diciembre llegaban las brisas, and Alison Bechdel’s 2006 comic memoir, Fun Home. Starting from a Deleuzian reading of the Recherche, this dissertation proposes the notion of the “proustian truth seeker”, a thematic and stylistic phenomenon which can be traced in all three writers. The characteristics of the truth seeker can be used to understand the ways in which the narrators of these novels are driven by a particular sort of desire that determines the novel’s structure, style, and thematic concerns. Ultimately, the concept of the proustian truth seekers offers a way to understand the complex connection between these three writers as well as a powerful tool to study novels that blur the line between fiction and autobiographical non-fiction.
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Introduction

*It is not the world that is absurd, nor human thought: the absurd arises when the human need to understand meets the unreasonableness of the world, when “my appetite for the absolute and for unity” meets “the impossibility of reducing this world to a rational and reasonable principle.”* (Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisypheus*)

The relationship between form and content, specifically between sentence structure and the phenomena of memory and unmasking, are at the heart of Marcel Proust’s poetics. In *À la recherche du temps perdu*, famously long and apparently convoluted sentences become the perfect form for Proust’s themes of memory, homosexuality and the protagonist's transformation from overly-sensitive young man into a novelist. These sentences also serve to determine the overarching structures of the text, as this intimate connection between sentence and overall form becomes evident after a careful look at Proust’s entire novel. Even though Proust’s influence is broad and difficult to trace, two contemporary women writers, one a novelist and the other comic book writer, channel Proust both in the form of their work and its content. Marvel Moreno, from Colombia and Alison Bechdel from the United States are, in their own way, proustian.

The matter of Proust’s influence in the twentieth century and beyond has centered on the ways in which the *Recherche* was read by key authors of British Modernism, such as Virginia Woolf, and later permeated their and their disciple’s work (Lewis 79). In Latin America, on the other hand and as Harvey puts it, Proust’s influence is “widely acknowledged and indeed self-evident as we find widespread echoes of his form and style in so many later works” (Harvey 8). Indeed, Proust’s impact on modern fiction seems to be universal and undeniable, so pervasive that his mark can be felt in Carpentier’s neo-baroque Cuban narratives; in Woolf’s deeply personal explorations of identity; and even in Latin American Boom masters like Julio Cortázar, Ernesto
Sábato, and Gabriel García Márquez, by way of their contact with William Faulkner (Craig 244). His authority seems so unavoidable that Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes, in a letter quoted by Harvey, says that “El que lee Proust se Proustituye” (Harvey 9).

Studies like Harvey’s or Craig’s trace influence guided, to some degree, by Harold Bloom’s understanding of the concept, which places the master, Proust, in an agonistic struggle with his disciples, who follow him until they get the chance to swerve away and destroy him and achieve their independence (Bloom 15). This hierarchical relationship between master and disciple works well for Bloom’s purposes of describing literature as a struggle between poets and the literary work as the result of that struggle. This notion of influence, however, has some limitations. First, it places undue attention on the deliberateness of the act of writing, as if novelists wrote primarily in response to their masters and not for other, unknowable reasons. Second, it characterizes the relationship between texts as a struggle for dominance and not, as Todorov would explain it, as a dialogue between discourses (Todorov x). The ultimate problem with this type of analysis is that it can only lead to descriptive looks at an author’s work, and the only possible conclusion is the recognition of one author’s influence over another. A study of Proust’s influence in Latin America, for example, will show that he has been, indeed, very influential. And while this can in itself be an extremely fruitful study that traces thematic and stylistic choices from one country and one language to others, it can only conclude that this or that novelist is “proustian” because of this or that passage about memory or time.

This dissertation proposes the comparison between Proust, Bechdel, and Moreno not in an attempt to demonstrate the influence of one over the others, or to propose that Proust is a master to these disciples. Instead, it will propose a careful look at the intersection of style and thematic concerns in each writer. By calling attention to style, rather than influence, this dissertation attempts to
sidestep the issues of hierarchy and mastery and propose a reading that comes closer to Borges’ thoughts on *Kafka y sus precursores*, a non-historicist historiography of literature (Pellejero 187).

A careful reading of Moreno and Bechdel will shed light on Proust’s work as much as a look at Proust’s work sheds light on Moreno and Bechdel’s. Therefore, from this moment on, any connection or similarity between these three authors must not be read as simple evidence of Proust’s influence over Moreno or Bechdel, or as a demonstration of their literary merit as followers of a twentieth century master. Instead, differences and similarities between them should be counted as tools that allow a more nuanced understanding of each writer, regardless of who came first or is more influential.

The choice to include both these authors in an analysis of proustian poetics is dictated by several factors. On the one hand, the authors’ main texts, Moreno’s *En diciembre llegaban las brisas* (1987) and Bechdel’s *Fun Home* (2006) are all formally related to Proust’s novel. Moreno’s sentences are long, winding and full of tension, made to highlight contradictions between the beginning and the ending. This is also true of Bechdel’s visual and verbal style, panel work and text. In terms of content, these authors are also closely related to Proust and each other. All three share the (presumably) autobiographical narration, the disillusioned point of view of a young man or woman as she grows up in a conservative, provincial, sexually conservative (when it is not sexually violent) setting. Both Moreno and Bechdel narrate coming-of-age-stories of women who are too smart or sensitive for their environments.

On the other hand, in terms of character creation, all three texts follow a similar structure in the way they create and introduce characters. In all three cases, a character is carefully introduced and almost dissected, only to be slowly unmasked by the narration. The reader must, along with narrators and protagonists grasp at the full knowledge of a character that is eventually
and unavoidably undone. This desire for a complete knowledge of the characters that surround them is what drives the narrators in all these texts. The possibility of finding something akin to an irreducible kernel of their personality, an essential, unchanging and sincere understanding of them pushes these narrators to craft a style and a sentence structure that allows for a peeling back of outer layers in an (ultimately fruitless) endeavor to reach the true version of each person and themselves.

In *En diciembre llegaban las brisas*, Marvel Moreno narrates the lives of four friends in the Colombian city of Barranquilla during the 1940s through the 1960s. The novel is divided in three long sections, each dedicated to one of the narrator’s childhood friends. Lina, a facsimile of Moreno herself, recounts their discovery of sexual desire and the brutal repercussions of sexual liberation in the society they inhabit. The novel, written from exile in Paris, received little critical and commercial attention, as the country was still enamored with the much more positive, quaint, version of the Caribbean depicted in the works of Gabriel García Márquez, who had won the Nobel Prize only five years earlier. Moreno, who avoided the company of journalists and the country’s cultural power brokers, was a poor self-promoter, and her novel has languished in relative obscurity, overshadowed by the followers of magical realism. The novel’s complicated editorial history, which saw it published years later without the essential epilogue, and then out of print for decades, further complicated study of Moreno’s work. Her short stories and an as-of-yet unpublished but finished manuscript for her second novel, *El tiempo de las amazonas*, remain unavailable despite a renewed critical interest. Moreno’s distaste for self-promotion, and the novel’s unrepentant difficulty, as well as its brutally honest attack on the country’s moral conservatism and its obvious hypocrisies have made it unpopular with readers, while critical
responses have focused on the issues of sexual liberation and feminism while mostly ignoring its stylistic innovations.

On the other hand, Alison Bechdel’s 2006 comic *Fun Home* tells the autobiographic story of Alison’s discovery of her homosexuality and an exploration of her father’s suicide as well as his own homosexual desires. Immediately hailed by critics and readers as a truly “literary” work in the medium of comics¹, *Fun Home* has received almost constant attention since its publication, having been turned into a Broadway musical in 2013, a sign of a work’s mainstream resonance. With *Fun Home*, Bechdel joined the ranks of other comics artists who, along with Art Spiegelman, Marjane Satrapi, Chris Ware, Daniel Clowes, and Harvey Pekar, dominate a large portion of critical study dedicated to comics. And while Bechdel’s work has been mostly read in terms of its depiction of lesbianism, it has also been studied from a variety of perspectives, including a proustian reading by Fiorenzo Iuliano. No critic, however, has explored exactly how Bechdel’s style is a textual embodiment of her and her character’s desire for truth.

The purpose here is then twofold. On the one hand, to propose a reading of Proust’s work centered on the relationship between sentence structure, overall structure and, the protagonist’s desire for knowledge. Second, to attempt a truly comparative approach that brings together three different authors that have never been studied together despite the fact that they are thematically and formally linked. As this dissertation will show, Proust’s Marcel, Moreno’s Lina, and Bechdel’s Alison are proustian truth seekers. This characterization of them as “truth seekers” determines both formal and thematic characteristics of the texts. That is to say, texts that feature a proustian truth

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¹ This dissertation will avoid the term “graphic novel” in favor of the more generic term “comic”, which applies more precisely to Bechdel’s autobiographical, non-fiction work. “Graphic novel” is also a loosely defined term, sometimes used to denote certain length or the apparent “maturity” of a comic.
seeker as a narrator share similar thematic arcs, settings, and character motivations as well as sentence structure and other formal characteristics.

There are at least five thematic features of a truth-seeker novel, and they will become apparent in the following chapters. First, they all have a first-person, narrator-protagonist who recounts his or her life with a special interest in childhood or the passage from childhood to adulthood as a result of the discovery of sexual desire. This narration may focus on a specific event or span the entirety of the protagonist’s life. However, it always places specific and special attention to sexual, sentimental, and cultural rites of passage and the inner conflicts these create in the protagonist. Proust, Moreno, and Bechdel narrate specific moments in their protagonist’s life, from childhood to adulthood, but always focus on events that are relevant to their sentimental educations.

Second, these texts have a somewhat autobiographical dimension. This is a difficult issue because it complicates the separation between author and novel and between narrator and novelist. While it is difficult to deny the obvious autobiographical dimensions in Bechdel’s comic memoir, Proust’s and Moreno’s texts are primarily, and perhaps exclusively, novels. The similarities between the protagonists and their narrators, as well as third-party testimony that suggest a connection between the two, however, should not be ignored. Even if Proust and Moreno are not strictly autobiographical, the very nature of their truth seekers put pressure on the distinction between fiction and non-fiction.

Also, truth seekers are protagonists who have a particular relationship with their environments. They are always ill at ease in their world. For one reason or another, these characters are particularly sensitive to the hypocrisies and dishonesties that operate around them. And although they may try to participate, they cannot fully engage and become normal members of
their societies. This puts truth seekers at odds with the people around them, so they often experience neurosis and depression. Because of their relationship with society, truth seekers often become outside observers to lives of their characters, who seem incomprehensibly alien to them.

As a result of this alienation, truth seekers always come of age in a world in which hypocrisy, falsehood, and pretense are either essential for survival or highly-desired traits. Societies in which moral values conflict, or at least outwardly condemn desire, sexual or otherwise, are often the setting for truth-seeker novels. In Proust, Parisian society values the appearance of nobility, wealth, and culture while openly condemning sexual desire and honesty. In Moreno, Barranquilla’s staunchly catholic values hold marriage, female purity, and fidelity in highest esteem, but also condone violence, oppression, and hypocrisy as by-products of male control of female sexual desire. And in Bechdel, homosexual desire, while not strictly forbidden when it comes to Alison’s coming out, is necessarily hidden and repressed in her father’s case, who must navigate a landscape of appearances which hide his true nature to the world.

Finally, novels which feature proustian truth seekers always narrate the narrator’s entry into the world of artistic production. As curious outsiders, truth seekers are drawn to art as a way to access the truth they believe is hidden under the illusions around them. In this way, truth seekers narrate their discovery and apprenticeship in the art form they ultimately become masters in. In fact, the final result of their search is always the discovery of art, specifically literature and the creation of the text. In this way, truth seeker novels are always narcissistic texts that call attention to their own creation and their textual nature.

In formal terms, texts that feature proustian truth seekers also share a series of stylistic and structural choices that give textual form to the protagonist’s desire for truth. These features appear in all truth-seeker texts and can be observed consistently across different media. Comics, for
example, while essentially different from literature, can and do contain the following five formal and structural particularities which make up the style of truth-seeker texts.

First, these texts always follow the structure of a *Kunstlerroman*. As it will become apparent later on, theses are always the narratives of an apprenticeship of a man, or woman, of letters. They feature the narration and description of the narrator’s contact with literature, their reading and their experiments with writing, but also contain reflections on the nature of writing and literature. This makes truth-seeker texts stories about the apprenticeship of literature as well as de facto manifestoes in which narrators/authors express the essential concerns of their poetics.

On the other hand, the overall structure of truth-seeker novels mirrors moment-to-moment structure. This means that the basic building blocks of narration, the sentence in traditional literature and the panel in comics, behave in similar ways to the overarching form of the novel. This will become apparent after a careful look at each of the examples studied here. However, as a general rule, the key components of the sentence, which will be described below, can also be observed in the structure of the complete work.

In terms of sentence structure, these texts feature a particular style that privileges tension and discovery. In truth-seeker texts, most sentences are made in such a way that the beginning and the end are in a constant conflict with one another. Sentences begin with a certain feeling of certainty, as the truth seeker observes and scrutinizes what appears to be a straightforward character, place or event he or she can easily interpret. As the sentence continues, however, and the narrator meanders around the object, the initial certainty is called into question. The sentence ends with a sudden, and often traumatic, realization: all previous certainties are false. This happens so commonly in these texts that tension and discovery become the guiding principles of their moment-to-moment style. And, as was previously explained, the overarching structures of these
texts mirror this format of tension and discovery in such a way that they are, in a way, texts about tension and discovery as they are structured around those two principles.

Additionally, all truth seekers are driven by a specific type of desire for truth. This curiosity determines most of their actions as characters in their texts, but is also expressed as a specific stylistic choice. This means that each truth seeker feels desire for truth in a different way and the differences between one truth seeker and another can be understood and expressed as effects of the varying types of desire they feel. In Proust, for example, Marcel feels a very possessive sort of desire as he attempts to completely pin down and absorb the people he observes. This appears as a textual feature in the sentence, which insistently tries to drill down to the essence of the object while, at the same time, tries to envelop it completely. In Moreno, on the other hand, Lina experiences a more positive type of desire, less concerned with possession and more interested in knowing the object, in this case Lina’s friends, as a way to access the possibility of creation that satisfies curiosity without cancelling out the other’s individuality. And in Bechdel, Alison’s desire is more positive still. As she tries to identify the true nature of her father’s life and identity, she comes to realize that complete knowledge is impossible, in no small part because she does not truly believe in the notion of individual identity. Her desire then leads her not to possess her father but to collect as many versions of him as she possibly can, to pile on contradictory evidence on top of previously held beliefs because these allow her to dissolve the boundaries between her father and her. In other words, Alison desires in order to become her object of desire.

These formal, stylistic, and thematic particularities appear, in one way or another, in these three texts by Proust, Moreno, and Bechdel. The following chapters will identify, describe, and analyze these features while paying special attention to the way in which they influence and determine one another. Future work on other truth seekers must attempt to identify these
characteristics in both form and content which, as other chapters will show, are inseparable in these types of text.

In order to examine these connections between form and content in the works of Proust, Moreno, and Bechdel, this dissertation will rely on the work of French theorist Gilles Deleuze. His work provides two key concepts that will serve to guide this analysis: his work on the *Recherche* in *Proust and Signs* on one hand and, in the other, his analysis of desire in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Deleuze undertakes a type of analysis that, in its initial stages, proposes concepts and definitions which can be, in a way, lifted and applied to texts other than those Deleuze studies. Therefore, this dissertation will adapt the parts of Deleuze’s work that can shed a light on the texts that are being analyzed here while abandoning Deleuze when his analysis diverges into philosophical and political issues that lie outside of this present study. In his work, Deleuze tends to use literary texts as a stepping stone of sorts. He proposes insightful readings of the texts, but abandons them when he can focus on the issues he and Guattari are truly interested in. This dissertation will, in a way, pick up where Deleuze’s work on Proust leaves off.

In *Proust and Signs* (1964), Deleuze proposes that the world of the *Recherche* is made up of a system of signs that the Marcel must decode. This process of decoding is what, in Deleuze’s reading, structures the entire novel. This is perhaps Deleuze’s most insightful comment on the *Recherche*. In his words, “What is involved is not an exposition of involuntary memory, but the narrative of an apprenticeship: more precisely, the apprenticeship of a man of letters” (Deleuze 3). This assessment, which calls into question the prevailing critical consensus and proposes a look at structure and form, rather than content or thematic concern, will serve as a model for this dissertation’s analysis not only of Proust, but also on Moreno and Bechdel. As it will become apparent in the following chapters, Proust’s novel is, in fact, the narrative of an apprenticeship in
a world made of signs. This is also true of Moreno and Bechdel’s works. In the same way that the *Recherche* is not essentially about time or memory, Moreno’s *En diciembre llegaban las brisas* is not about sexual liberation from a patriarchal society and Bechdel’s *Fun Home* is not only about Alison’s discovery of homosexuality. By focusing on stylistic patterns before looking at the content, this dissertation can examine extremely disparate works and find telling similarities. This method also allows for a relatively simple transference unto other works which, either partially or completely, contain the features of the proustian truth seeker.

Deleuze also provides the concept that serves as the title for this dissertation, the notion of the “truth seeker”. This is partly described by Deleuze as a curious, jealous man who catches a lie in his lover’s face (Deleuze 98). In Deleuze’s understanding, this lover approaches the world of signs that surrounds him like a reader who tries to violently wrestle truth away from the codified text he sees. The result of this violence is ultimately artistic creation, since artistic signs have the possibility of allowing access to some form of truth. This somewhat limited understanding of the truth seeker will be expanded upon and applied to Proust, as a completion of Deleuze’s work, as well as Moreno and Bechdel.

Additionally, in *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari propose a nuanced understanding of desire that will help understand the ways in which Marcel, Lina, and Alison approach their searches for truth. They question the typical psychoanalytic understanding of desire as an expression of fundamental lacks that the subject tries to fill and instead propose a kind of desire that is not to be defined in negative terms. This allows Deleuze and Guattari to describe longing that does not produce guilt or neuroses and does not depend on the subject’s attempts to possess the object of his desires in order to fulfill them. What Deleuze and Guattari propose instead is a kind of desire that leads to guilt-free production and not consumption (Deleuze and Guattari 25).
This positive, production-based desire, calls into question the typical, lack-based understanding of desire and is helpful to understand how Marcel’s desire for truth is fundamentally different from that felt by Lina and Alison. While Marcel is mostly interested in possessing and pinning down the people around him, Lina and Alison’s desires guide them towards artistic production that is free from the guilt and jealousy produced by lack-based desire.

In this way, this dissertation will be divided in three chapters, each dedicated to one of the authors under scrutiny here. The first, dedicated to Proust and the *Recherche*, will contain an analysis of Deleuze’s work on Proust, a definition of the term “truth seeker”, and a close reading of sections of the *Recherche* that will show how truth seeking is a stylistic issue as much as it is a thematic one. This first chapter will serve as theoretical basis of sorts that will guide the analysis of the other two authors. The second chapter will focus on Marvel Moreno’s *En diciembre llegaban las brisas*. After a brief discussion of the different types of desire at play in all three texts, this chapter will propose a comparative reading of the stylistic particularities in Moreno and Proust to see how understanding the Colombian author’s work in terms of truth seeking can shed a different light on its place in the Latin American canon as well as offer a more nuanced understanding of Proust’s enduring influence. Finally, the third chapter will propose a reading of Alison Bechdel’s comic memoir. Because it is a medium so different from traditional literature, that chapter will contain a discussion on the particularities of comics and an attempt to describe and understand how style in comics can be observed and compared to style in literature. The final section of the chapter, after a close reading of the proustian sentence in comics form, proposes that Bechdel’s Alison is a particularly postmodern type of truth seeker.
The first chapter is entitled “Unmasking and the Truth Seeker in Proust’s In Search of Lost Time”. This chapter presents Deleuze’s description of a world made up of signs that must be violently broken into and the way this notion can be found in the *Recherche*. The chapter also suggests that the strongest desire that motivates the narrator in the *Recherche* is the craving for a broad and profound knowledge of his world, especially of the people around him. He tries to crystalize them into an unchanging, final version, and, at the same time, understand why the inevitable discrepancies continue to surprise him. He would like nothing more than to accurately pin down, as an entomologist would, the people he comes across, to read them and remember them as they appear beneath the surface. This all-consuming desire to delve as deeply as possible into each character is one of the most important driving forces behind the entire *Recherche*. The novel’s famous incursions into memory and time, from the madeleine incident onwards, are part of this very search. However, these investigations are doomed to failure in Proust’s world. Finding a person's essential truth is impossible, but the process of uncovering different versions of each character gives the novel its form. This process of discovery is determined by sentence structure and, at the same time, determines the entire novel’s overarching framework.

Proust’s sentences are famously long and are filled with subordinate clauses and digressions. Most of his sentences exhibit a tension between the beginning, which appears to be a certainty (Marcel’s opinion about a character or a situation, for example) and the ending, which appears to completely undermine the initial certainty. The middle of the sentence is filled with a series of commas, subordinate clauses and asides that recreate the way in which the narrator’s mind continuously wanders, prods, and investigates. In this manner, sentences mirror the back and forth motion that characterizes the narrator’s (including Marcel’s, and ultimately, the reader’s) relationship with characters he encounters. As with Proust’s sentences, these relationships begin
with an initial impression that appears to be accurate. This is followed by a series of digressions that can last pages or entire volumes and ends with a surprising revelation that takes place precisely because of Marcel’s relentlessly inquisitive and over-analyzing nature. This format of recurring unmaskings serves as a connection between the idea of involuntary memory and the novel’s stylistic structure. By demanding attention and retention from the reader, the novel uses its stylistic choices to accomplish its goal of remembrance. When Marcel encounters a shocking revelation about a character or a situation, they, the narrator and the reader, are forced to remember everything they knew about him or her. The confrontation with an unexpected version of someone instantly recalls all previous incarnations and assumptions about that person, and even if these memories become moot in the light of new revelations, they involuntarily come rushing back, all at once and condensed into a fleeting intensity of remembrance.

A character’s unmasking affects Marcel in the same way his sentences affect the reader: it causes an initial surprise, prompts a series of reflections on the impossibility of truly knowing the world (which, in the Recherche, are usually accompanied by a relevant reference to optical media such as photography or film), and ends with a brand new mask, one that appears to mark the end of the process but is destined, like all others, to be eventually destroyed by a subsequent revelation. This is the basic structure of the novel and is inexorably linked to the novel’s key concerns, from the passage of time and memory to jealousy and homosexuality. In fact, the back and forth motion of apparent knowledge, gained through careful observation during each meeting, that leads to a sort of mental digression and ends with an inevitable surprise is the only way in which the novel can approach its main subjects and is irrevocably tied to the way it uses language. Marcel’s search is destined to fail as he never finds the ultimate truth about anyone or
anything. He does discover the role of writing as a tool and result of the search, but he continues to be plagued by unhappiness and disappointment.

The second chapter is entitled “Desire and the Search for Truth in En diciembre llegaban las brisas”. This novel has had a complicated publication history and, while critical attention has been somewhat varied, most of it has focused on the issues of sexual liberation and patriarchal norms in Colombian society. This is certainly a worthwhile way to approach Moreno’s masterpiece, but it ignores her stylistic innovations, which are usually only mentioned in passing and disconnected from any discussion of the novel’s thematic concerns. As a result of this hole in critical study of En diciembre, this chapter proposes the complex notion of desire as way to access the style of the novel, as well as its overall structure and the nature of its truth seeker. Comparing different approaches to the understanding of desire, taken form sociology, philosophy, and critical theory, this chapter will outline how each type of desire can determine the type of truth seeking in Proust, Moreno, and Bechdel.

Additionally, this second chapter will show that Moreno, like Proust, uses sentence structure to delve deeply into the nature of her characters, thereby creating an overarching structure of tension and discovery. Moreno’s sentences are long and winding, filled with subordinate clauses that mix verbal and historical tenses and times. These reveal, like the novel’s structure, the narrator’s underlying desire to unearth her character’s true essence, the root of their identity through the process of writing, which is depicted as a uniquely powerful way to explore memory. In fact, finding out as much as possible about the three main characters is the narrator’s biggest concern, and it is reflected both in its overarching structure and its sentence structure. As with
Proust and Bechdel, it is this curiosity, this desire to reach an unchanging kernel of identity, which provides the impetus for narration, which is inexorably linked to its style.

Most of the novel's sentences start with a gerund or with a logical connector that creates tension between the tense of the main clause, usually present, and that of the subordinate clauses, past, or more frequently, future. Beneath this sentence structure lays one of the novel’s essential concerns, the idea of destiny. Each chapter begins with a non-narrative section where the fates of all characters appear to be previously determined and doomed to somehow fulfill what a quoted passage from the Bible predicts. This beginning section, which some critics have called a “theoretical” introduction, contains all the themes, events and conclusions of the chapter that follows. But the narrator’s curiosity forces her to unfold the stories, to expand this concentrated mass into a coherent story by converting it to writing. Each of the three chapters follows the same structure in this manner: they begin with a concentrated, theoretical prediction, flow seamlessly into a series of digressions, and end with an unavoidable yet unfamiliar confirmation of the impossibility of real knowledge.

As in Proust, the beginning of each sentence contains, in one way or another, its end. It arrives inexorably, but not before embarking on a temporal and thematic roundabout which radically changes the narrator’s understanding of a specific character. This is especially noticeable in the way in which secondary characters are introduced and used to shed new light on the lives of the protagonists. Each new revelation about of the three protagonists prompts a reference to an external form of cultural expression which has purported to grant access to the truth. In keeping with its interest in the nature of desire and its connection to patriarchal society, the novel often refers to either the Bible or psychoanalysis, two forces the narrator sees as designed to subjugate desire, especially female desire.
The third and final chapter is entitled “Intertextuality and the Search for Truth in Fun Home” and proposes a reading of Alison Bechdel’s comic memoir through the lens of truth seeking that has been established in the previous two chapters. Similarly to Proust and Moreno, the possibility of finding - and capturing - a character’s true self is what motivates Alison Bechdel’s writing. The purpose of her graphic memoir is to investigate and uncover all possible levels and versions of the main characters, her father and, to a lesser extent, Alison herself. Her process of discovery is also comparable to Proust and Moreno’s: it begins with a moment of initial certainty where both reader and narrator believe they know a character completely, then entertains multiple detours made up of subordinate clauses (which in Bechdel’s case is almost always autobiographical) until finally arriving at a conclusion that appears to be the end of the search. However, as in Proust and Moreno, this mask of certitude is inevitably destroyed by a subsequent revelation that prompts the beginning of a new cycle. This back and forth process, which starts in certainty, goes through unmasking and then ends in a new, provisional certainty, is the works’ organizing principle. This chapter will be dedicated to a reading of Bechdel’s work in terms of truth seeking in order to show that certain essential elements of Proust’s style, including his thematic concerns with time, memory, homosexuality and the impossibility of completely knowing the world, are effectively translated into the comic medium in Fun Home.

However, this chapter first has to explain precisely how style in Proust and Moreno can be compared to style in Bechdel’s comic. By defining comics as a medium in which tensions are fundamental, structural parts of the form, this chapter argues that it is by exacerbating and calling attention to three tensions that occur naturally in the medium, Fun Home participates of the stylistic qualities of truth seeking. The complex, often contradictory relationship between text and images; between the single image and the image-in-series; and between the single panel and the holistic
totality of the page layout (which will be referred to here as planche) occur in all comics. However, Bechdel’s style relies particularly heavily on them and combines them with the subject matter in such a way that her work can be read as a typical truth-seeker novel in terms of both form and content.

Additionally, this final chapter will introduce the notion of intertextual key swapping to explain a medium-specific way in which truth seeking appears in Fun Home. The process whereby the narrator discovers the identities of her father is anchored in a broad, if haphazard, understanding of culture. Bechdel utilizes literature, literary history, philosophy, critical thought, and History to frame her discoveries about her father’s identity. This reliance on an external system of reference in order to explain the elusive nature of her characters is called intertextual key swapping. Faced with a sign she cannot break open, her father’ suicide, for example, Alison tries out different cultural references that might allow her a glimpse of the truth inside the sign. In this manner, Bechdel’s father assumes a myriad of masks modeled after literary figures, both fictional and non-fictional, as well as identities taken from other systems of reference. The overarching structure of the comic, therefore, comprises a succession of identities that the father wears. Each new mask adds another dimension to the character, as if there were no limit to the number of masks a person can simultaneously wear and as if it were impossible to shed all of them to reach his or her essence. This mechanism, which substitutes one literary mask with another, takes place in the combination of words and images typical of the comic book medium.

The present study is significant for two main reasons. First, it proposes a reading of a much-studied twentieth century masterpiece through a lens that is interested, not in memory or time, the two obvious and most common ways to study it, but rather in the confluence of its unique style with the particularities of its structure and the concerns of its narrator. By reading Proust’s work
in this way, and by applying a notion taken from Gilles Deleuze, this dissertation can propose a critical concept, the truth seeker, that can be applied to other works in which style prominently calls attention to itself and cannot be studied or understood separately from the content.

Additionally, this dissertation offers perhaps the most comprehensive look at the particularities of Marvel Moreno’s style. At the same time it proposes a reading that goes beyond the issues of patriarchal oppression and emotional, first-hand accounts of Moreno’s life as a way to access her text. En diciembre llegaban las brisas is undoubtedly a Colombian masterpiece and this study hopes to ally itself with a growing number of commentators who want to give it serious critical attention by comparing it to other twentieth century canonical works in the hopes that the academic world will recognize the novel’s stylistic mastery and its place in the canon of contemporary women writers in the Americas.

Finally, the reading of Alison Bechdel’s Fun Home proposed here offers a definitive answer, in thematic and stylistic terms, to the question of what precisely is proustian about the 2006 comic memoir. In this way, Bechdel’s comic can be compared to two masterpieces on equal terms and derive its importance from its own merit and not from the comparison with canonical works. This reading also provides a key that can be used to read Bechdel’s other work, particularly her 2012 memoir Are You My Mother, as well as other comic memoirs in which intertextuality, cultural reference and juxtaposition play important roles.
Chapter 1: Unmasking and the Truth Seeker in Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*

Marcel Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu* is rightly praised as one the great masterpieces of the twentieth century. Its cathedral-like construction and its discussions on time, memory and identity have proven endlessly influential and the subject of limitless critical attention. This chapter will focus on a single character, Marcel, who serves as protagonist, narrator, and a facsimile of sorts of Proust himself. Unlike other narrators of his time, and despite what the broadness of his interests may suggest, Marcel is driven by one single purpose which guides him in his search and determines the style and structure of the text, as well as its themes and concerns. This purpose is the search for truth. As Marcel, and the reader with him, encounter places, characters, and experiences, Marcel’s sole desire is to understand them fully, as if they could be observed, dissected, and registered in his mind, devoid of pretense and appearances. Experiences, and characters especially, do not offer Marcel a single, true, version of themselves; they rarely remain fixed and knowable.

When the reader first meets Swann, he finds him to be a sophisticated, womanizing socialite respected and admired in the most exclusive salons in Paris. By the end of *Swann in Love* Swann has sworn off his lover Odette, whom he finds to be tacky and unpleasant. A few pages later, he has married her and become a completely different person, no longer held in high esteem by Parisian society. To these two versions of Swann the narrator adds a third, Swann as Gilberte’s father, who becomes an almost mythical figure, closer to a storybook king than to the Swanns the
reader previously met. “pour moi Swann était surtout son père, et non plus le Swann de Combray […] il était devenu un personnage nouveau” (Proust 232) Part of the process that takes Proust’s narrator on a tour of his past involves the discovery and rediscovery of different instances of the same character. The Swanns that appear in the first volume behave in almost diametrically opposite ways and even look different; he is always the same person, but Marcel and the reader see more than one version of him.

Naturally, the characters are not the only ones who change as the novel progresses. The narrator himself is well aware of his own evolution and the way that it appears to multiply versions of characters. To the different Swanns then, the novel adds the different iterations of the narrator who behave differently in each meeting with the same person. Upon meeting an older Swann, so different from previous versions, the narrator muses about how his own evolution affects the way he perceives his ageing friend.

Certes, avec sa figure d'où, sous l'action de la maladie des segments entiers avaient disparu, comme dans un bloc de glace qui fond et dont des pans entiers sont tombés, il avait bien changé. Mais je ne pouvais m'empêcher d'être frappé combien davantage il avait changé par rapport à moi. Cet homme, excellent, cultivé, que j'étais bien loin d'être ennuyé de rencontrer, je ne pouvais arriver à comprendre comment j'avais pu l'ensemencer autrefois d'un mystère tel que son apparition dans les Champs-Élysées me faisait battre le cœur au point que j'avais honte de m'approcher de sa pèlerine doublée de soie (Proust 917)

It is evident then that a key issue here is the narrator’s perception. Swann has undoubtedly changed physically, socially and even intellectually, but what strikes the narrator the most is the
way he changes in relation to him. The phenomenon becomes a mystery for Marcel as he finds himself attempting, again and again, to understand a character. He tries to fix each person he meets, to crystallize them into an unchanging, final version. This is a kind of desire that Proust’s Marcel shares with Marvel Moreno’s Lina and Alison Bechdel’s Alison. All three narrators share a kind of curiosity that drives their personal searches; Lina studies her female friends and the male society that precipitates their personal tragedies, and Alison wants to find a true version of her father that will, ultimately, point her towards a true version of herself. In fact, these four character/narrators strive, not for memory or nostalgia, but for comprehension. In a word, they seek the truth about their acquaintances, the society that surrounds them, and themselves.

In his meetings with Parisian society, his lovers, and his sensuous experiences, Marcel would like nothing more than to accurately pin down, as an entomologist would, each person he comes across, to read them and remember them as they are beneath the surface, to get to the bottom of them. This desire to delve as deeply as possible into each character in an attempt to get to the bottom of them is one of the most important driving forces behind the entire Recherche.

Like Swann, however, almost every character, the narrator included, wears different masks every time they appear. Marcel’s keen observation of a new character seems to suggest that he is capable of grasping exactly who they are and what they are really like. Swann’s first appearance as a guest to Marcel’s grandparents (and the reason his mother cannot come to kiss him goodnight) appears to be definitive until this version is undone pages later. When the narrator (and thus the reader) think they have found, at last, a definitive version of someone, the novel rescinds it by revealing a new, contradictory version, a new mask that might well be removed later. What Marcel will slowly discover is that everything and everyone in the world of the Recherche is mask, a
surface representation that hides an ulterior, often contradictory, underbelly. He will dedicate a great deal of time and effort to finding and removing each mask he encounters.

Later, Marcel comments on the subject of unmasking late in the second volume “Chaque être est détruit quand nous cessons de le voir ; puis son apparition suivante est une création nouvelle, différente de celle qui l'a immédiatement précédée, sinon de toutes (Proust 511). Here he is barely beginning his exploration of the phenomenon, but is already aware of its importance. But despite this relatively early realization that it is likely impossible to really know someone, Marcel spends most of the novel attempting to do just that. Almost every encounter leads to some sort of discovery, often a shocking one, that creates anguish and fear as Marcel finds it impossible to trust his own senses when it comes to perceiving the people around him. A careful look into the way in which characters are discovered and rediscovered in what appears to be an endless back-and-forth cycle of apparent certainty and subsequent surprise will reveal a glimpse into Proust's poetics. The character's (and the reader's) inability to fix a person into a single form raises some important questions about the construction of the entire Recherche and Proust's attitude towards the novel, the act of writing and man's ability to know the world around him. It is Marcel’s desire for truth that forces him to go from one unmasking to the next, always digging deeper into a person or an experience. Thus, the purpose of this chapter is threefold. First, it is to investigate how the search for truth serves as the novel’s foremost structural principle. Second, this chapter will attempt to define the figure of the Proustian truth seeker, as it will become essential to this dissertation's understanding of Moreno and Bechdel. And third, this chapter will show how the figure of the Truth seeker serves as the bridge that inexorably joins the novel’s style with its thematic and narrative concerns. This will hold true for the other authors studied here.
Deleuze: Signs, Apprenticeship and Truth Seeking

For the purposes of this reading of the Recherche, Gilles Deleuze’s work in Proust and Signs becomes an essential tool, as it will serve as a theoretical starting point from which to initiate the present study of Moreno and Bechdel’s truth seekers. In Proust and Signs, Deleuze suggests that signs and their interpretation provide the key to Proust’s work. Rather than memory, he posits, signs serve to organize the novel’s structure, its ontological concerns, and its thematic interests.

What is essential in the Search is not memory and time, but the sign and truth. What is essential is not to remember, but to learn. For memory is valid only as a faculty capable of interpreting certain signs; time is valid only as the substance or type of this or that truth. And memory, whether voluntary or involuntary, intervenes only at specific moments of the apprenticeship, in order to concentrate its effect or to open a new path.

The notions of the Search are: sign, meaning, and essence; the continuity of apprenticeship and the abruptness of revelation (Deleuze 91)

Although Deleuze’s position can become convoluted as it develops further away from the novel and unto his own philosophical and semiotic ambitions, the book’s initial statements provide a powerful starting point for this work’s concerns not only with regards to Proust but also Moreno and Bechdel. In all three works, there is a narrator/protagonist that serves, in one way or another, as a stand-in for the writer herself, who, like their characters, appear to be obsessed with finding some sort of truth. As it will become apparent, Lina, and Alison, share Marcel’s desire for the final unmasking and his path from naive observer to experienced destroyer of masks to artist.

This search for lost truth, as Deleuze describes it, is in fact the same search the pushes Marcel and the reader to look for all possible variations of a character’s mask. The search is also
the force that guides the reader along the winding sentences the novel is known for. Without a strong desire for an ultimate truth, the narrator would never achieve the epiphanic realizations that both structure the novel and prove that the signs that make up the world can indeed be deciphered.

However, the process by which Marcel deciphers these signs and attempts to suss out the truth hidden within them is neither simple nor automatic. In fact, the entire novel is made up of his apprenticeship in the art of decoding signs and not of a series of realizations brought on by involuntary memory. As Deleuze points out,

What is essential to the Search is not in the madeleine or the cobblestone [...] What is involved is not an exposition of involuntary memory, but the narrative of an apprenticeship: more precisely, the apprenticeship of a man of letters. [...] however important its role, memory intervenes only as the means of an apprenticeship that transcends recollection both by its goals and by its principles. [...] There is no apprentice who is not the ‘Egyptologist’ of something (Deleuze 4).

This notion of apprenticeship becomes essential to this reading of proustian truth seekers. Deleuze’s insistence on the importance of truth and signs over memory in the Search is another way of saying that Marcel’s Bildung has more to do with his ability to decode and interpret than with his ability to remember or even write. This means that, from the very beginning, he is what Deleuze calls a truth seeker, and the entire novel is his process of refining his decoding prowess in search of truth. The process of decoding or unmasking ultimately pushes the Truth seeker towards the creation of art, in all three cases studied here a novel, since the act of creation is nothing more than an exercise in the destruction and creation of signs.
The truth seeker is the jealous man who catches a lying sign on the beloved's face. He is the sensitive man, in that he encounters the violence of an impression. He is the reader, the auditor, in that the work of art emits signs that will perhaps force him to create, like the call of genius to other geniuses. [...] Philosophy, with all its method and its goodwill, is nothing compared to the secret pressures of the work of art. Creation, like the genesis of the act of thinking, always starts from signs. The work of art is born from signs as much as it generates them; the creator is like the jealous man, interpreter of the god, who scrutinizes the signs in which the truth betrays itself (Deleuze 98).

A proustian truth seeker, as this chapter attempts to show, follows Deleuze’s definition both as a protagonist within the work of art and the organizing narrator. As a character, the truth seeker clashes constantly with a world that violently forces signs upon them in both abstract and very tangible ways. They may encounter a sign that conceals a great truth about the nature of art or love, or a character that presents them with myriad signs that hide their true nature. Charlus, Saint Loup and, especially, Albertine and Gilberte are signs that Marcel must constantly decode (or unmask). By doing so, he perfects his skills as an “Egyptologist”, attempts to fulfill his desire for truth and, most importantly, develops his style. Deleuze understands that decoding is a process and a skill. It requires time and mastery, both developed through practice. What he fails to fully understand is that Marcel becomes a master of deciphering signs, but in the process also becomes a master narrator, a creator of signs. His apprenticeship makes him a “man of letters”, as Deleuze calls it, a reader, but more importantly, a writer. What this dissertation hopes to show is that Proust’s particular style is the textual embodiment of Marcel’s truth-seeking behavior.
In fact, as it will become apparent later on, all texts that feature proustian truth seekers can be better understood through the Deleuzian lens this dissertation is proposing. Marcel, much like Moreno’s Lina and Bechdel’s Allison, is concerned most primarily with finding the truth about the world and, especially, the characters around him. Each of their particular styles is inexorably connected to the particularities of their truth seeking. The moment of unmasking, the instant in which the narrator realizes that a person he took to be obvious and understandable is actually much more complex and contradictory than he imagined is the moment in which he undertakes the process of decoding and the apprenticeship that will turn each narrator into an artist. In fact, as Erika Fülöp finds,

The event is [...]the unique, momentary ‘peeling away’ of the rind of things and the glimpse at what lies behind; and what is there is precisely the one thing in the world that is not problematic or complicated in itself, but rather the simplest and most evident possible. What is problematic instead is the access to that unknown, outside the rare privileged moments. The imperative is, indeed, the call of the signs, and artistic creation is undoubtedly the ultimate way to obey that imperative. But if the narrator believed that behind the horizon toward which writing tends he would find a problematic difference, rather than the Identity capable of assuring his peace of mind, he would certainly feel no urge whatsoever to take that path (Fülöp 45)

Fülöp suggests that there is indeed a possibility of knowing. She believes that Marcel can, at times, have a glimpse of complete knowledge, or, in other words, a glimpse of the truth behind a character’s mask. This is, however, a misunderstanding of the dynamics of apprenticeship, truth seeking and unmasking. The search for an ultimate, unchanging truth is doomed to failure in all
four writers studied here; in their worlds, there is no Truth to be found, no prize at the end of the journey. For every discovery, every disappointment and every unmasking, there are countless other masks that multiply versions of characters. Fülöp is correct in noting that access to truth and Identity is a key issue here, and that Marcel’s belief in the possibility of finding them is essential to his search. She is right in pointing out that Marcel’s thirst for truth most likely stems not from intellectual or ontological curiosity but rather from the simple desire for peace of mind.

Fülöp is also correct in suggesting that, if he didn’t think access to truth or identity were possible, Marcel would likely not embark on his apprenticeship with such zeal. However, she is mistaken in thinking that there is, in fact, something there, beneath the momentary peeling of the rind. There is, to reiterate, neither truth nor identity. Instead, there are only signs or, in Deleuzian terms, there is no Logos, only hieroglyphs (Deleuze 101). This means that, as much as Marcel and his narratorial counterparts in Moreno and Bechdel might want to find a final truth, the most they can hope for are interpretations.

Consequently, every time Marcel destroys a character’s mask in his search for an underlying kernel of truth, he is bound to find only another mask, another level of pure surface that only hides further levels of surface ad infinitum. The Search is in effect a series of unmaskings that serves as Marcel’s apprenticeship in decoding signs through his mastery of style. And style, as it will become apparent later, serves as the connecting tissue between the novel’s overarching narrative structure of truth-seeking and the moment-to-moment events that the narrator and characters deal with. This will also be true in Moreno and Bechdel.

Before continuing with the novel, a brief understanding of Deleuze’s concept of signs is essential. Deleuze posits the existence of four different types of signs (“worldly”, “love”, “sensuous” and, “art”), each tasked with concealing a specific type of truth, each connected to a
specific “line of time”. Without delving into the system Deleuze creates in order to organize these types, it will suffice to say here that signs are, in Deleuzian terms, devices that conceal the truth. Everything in the Recherche is a sign. As he points out, “we are wrong to believe in facts; there are only signs. We are wrong to believe in truth; there are only interpretations. The sign is an ever-equivocal, implicit, and implicated meaning” (Deleuze 92). In this way, everything is up to interpretation and nothing is evident. This is in keeping with Marcel’s neuroses as well as his inability to accept people, experiences and places as they are; he inevitably questions their sincerity and attempts to decode them. And since signs hide exactly what the narrator desires, they are the source of much of his discomfort. As Deleuze puts it, “There is always the violence of a sign that forces us into the search that robs us of peace. The truth is not to be found by affinity, nor by goodwill, but is betrayed by involuntary signs” (Deleuze 15). This agonistic approach to signs turns Marcel into an unwilling investigator, a sort of ontological gumshoe tasked with interrogating the world around him, never accepting the first answer as believable, never taking anything at face value. It also determines the relationship that all truth seekers have with the world. It is never friendly. They have to fight for everything: for the meaning of every sign, but also for their place in the world. As it will become clear further on, all truth seekers are, in one way or another, outsiders. They are too sensitive, too curious, too different and, too unwilling to accept signs as they are to fit in. This means that all truth seekers are necessarily unhappy and spend much of their energy forcing the world into a form they can comprehend.

According to Deleuze, “The leitmotif of Time regained is the word force: impressions that force us to look, encounters that force us to interpret, expressions that force us to think” (Deleuze 95). This force, the force of the sign that refuses to give up its truth, affects the reader as much as it affects the narrator. As the reader approaches the world in the novel from the narrator’s point of
view, and the narrator is himself a truth seeker, the ideal reader must experience the world of signs in a similar way, with an unrelenting curiosity,

Style

The careful reader of Proust must follow in the narrator’s footsteps and gather, as a detective would, all the evidence that the narrator leaves at the scene where one of the character’s masks is shattered. The novel thus asks its readers to become sleuths, and early in the first volume it calls attention to the importance of the detective-like investigation that both Marcel and the reader must perform.

Elle était comme toute attitude ou action où se révèle le caractère profond et caché de quelqu'un : elle ne se relie pas à ses paroles antérieures, nous ne pouvons pas la faire confirmer par le témoignage du coupable qui n'avoiera pas ; nous en sommes réduits à celui de nos sens dont nous nous demandons, devant ce souvenir isolé et incohérent, s'ils n'ont pas été le jouet d'une illusion (Proust 72)

The language here seems taken straight from a detective story, and the invitation for the reader to join in is obvious. But this passage also offers another important insight into the path that must be followed in order to engage with the world’s signs and wrestle the truth away from them. Like Marcel, the reader must be a detective, but unlike Marcel, he, the reader, cannot rely upon his senses. For the reader, sight is the only operant sense, and only as a way to decipher the symbols on the page. In fact, the only “senses” the reader has access to while engaging with the Recherche, or any book for that matter, are the structure, punctuation, vocabulary and rhythm of each sentence, in other words, its style. Style is the only way in which a reader can enter the world of a literary work, and he cannot navigate it without perceiving the world through style in the same way in
which he cannot approach his own world without perceiving it through his senses. For the narrator, the experience is perplexing because he is a detective unsure of his senses, and so the reader, looking at the world of the novel through its style is equally baffled because the only “senses” he has access to – the novel’s style - replicate Marcel’s experiences with his own senses.

Looking back at the problem of multiplication, replication and destruction of versions of each character and how it relates to style, it is necessary to look at the novel’s content, especially some of its most common themes, to understand how language and style are inexorably connected to the novel’s most important concerns. As it will become evident later, truth seeking and unmasking form the ideal template for the problems of desire, jealousy, homosexuality, memory and, the passage of time, the key problems of the *Recherche*. As a matter of fact, there is particular rhythm typical of a truth seeking narrator. This rhythm is, of course, an expression of a set of particular stylistic choices, which, in Proust, are most evident in the structure of his all too famous sentences. The back and forth motion of apparent knowledge, gained through careful deciphering of signs during each meeting that leads to a sort of mental digression and ends with an inevitable surprise is the only way in which the novel can approach its main subjects and is irrevocably tied to the way it uses language.

In most cases, the process of discovery and unmasking requires a long period to develop, some times spanning several volumes of the novel. This requires two things from the reader: on the one hand, it forces him to think about the way in which the passage of time affects perception and knowledge of a character. More importantly though, the longer instances of discovery and unmasking, the ones that require the reader to remember something he read dozens or even hundreds of pages before, place importance squarely on the idea of memory.
Les êtres ne cessent pas de changer de place par rapport à nous. Dans la marche insensible mais éternelle du monde, nous les considérons comme immobiles, dans un instant de vision trop court pour que le mouvement qui les entraîne soit perçu. Mais nous n'avons qu'à choisir dans notre mémoire deux images prises d'eux à des moments différents, assez rapprochés cependant pour qu'ils n'aient pas changé en eux-mêmes, du moins sensiblement, et la différence des deux images mesure le déplacement qu'ils ont opéré par rapport à nous (Proust 1092)

Here the narrator is infatuated with Albertine and, at the same time, is longing to spend time with Saint-Loup. But he is worried that she might fall in love with his friend, and thus asks Saint-Loup to meet him at Balbec only when there is no chance of Albertine being there. To preserve the feeling of calm he is currently enjoying, and in order to stave off another bout of jealousy, the narrator chooses to sacrifice time with Saint-Loup. In the previous volume, however, the young aristocrat had gained almost mythical status because of his closeness to Mme. de Guermantes and the narrator was always eager to spend as much time with him as he could. His comments on his current relationship with Saint-Loup reveal how subtle the multiplication of versions can be. At first glance, he acknowledges, there is no perceptible change in himself or his friend. The two “pictures” though, when placed next to each other, reveal just how each one has changed. This breaking of the masks is neither traumatic nor painful, but it does call attention to the way in which memory is essential to the functioning of the unmasking and discovery (and therefore truth seeking) principle in the novel.

Without the ability to remember previous iterations of characters, neither the reader nor the narrator can fully appreciate the flow of the novel. As time flows forward and Marcel and the
reader meet more characters, visit different places and experience more events, the novel asks them to collect snapshots of each encounter. Each one is carefully described, catalogued and put away. When it is needed again, when that character makes another appearance, the initial image is pulled up, as if from a database. The ensuing comparison results in an unmasking. The image of the early Saint Loup, his original mask, is shattered when the second image appears. He ceases to be the friend and kindred spirit and suddenly becomes a threatening competitor. The moment the sentence presents a second mask and destroys the earlier one, the reader experiences a surge of involuntary memory as all previous versions of a character come rushing back. Without this unintentional and uncontrollable recall, the effect of the unmasking (in both Marcel and the reader) would be impossible. This means that there is an inexorable connection between unmasking and involuntary memory in the same way there is a connection between unmasking and sentence structure.

Consequently, Proust’s understanding of style will prove useful here. As he sees it, style contains the instant of unmasking in such a way that rhythm, sentence structure and, syntax replicate the process whereby the narrator’s intelligence places two images (two versions of the same mask, two similar signs) next to each other in order to elucidate a hidden truth. Deleuze adequately quotes a passage from the third volume in which Marcel, with a surprising degree of insight (since he seems to forget it later) ponders the nature of style in literature. As Deleuze quotes from Proust, “One can string out in indefinite succession, in a description, the objects that figured in the described place; the truth will begin only when the writer takes two different objects, posits their relation, analogous in the world of art to that of the causal law in the world of science, and then in the necessary rings of a great style” (Deleuze 48)

Further on, Deleuze comes upon the great realization that style is meant here as a way of connecting two disparate images into a single, cohesive whole that, at least for a moment, has the
semblance of truth. “Which is to say that style is essentially metaphor. [...] This is because style, in order to spiritualize substance and render it adequate to essence, reproduces the unstable opposition, the original complication, the struggle and exchange of the primordial elements that constitute essence itself” (Deleuze 48). However, both Marcel and Deleuze quickly realize that the juxtaposition of disparate images does not constitute a finite, knowable, essence but rather a third sign that will require deciphering down the line. In other words, comparing the previous version of, say, Albertine, with the current may in fact destroy her previous mask, but that only serves to create another one. In this sense, style, which is to say the act of decoding is not the birth of Essence but rather a “continuous and refracted birth, [...]that birth which has become the metamorphosis of objects. Style is not the man, style is the Essence itself” (Deleuze 48).

Visual imagery and juxtaposition

Additionally, the passage that relates to the photographs quoted above also reveals the role that a certain kind of imagery plays in the moments in which the narrator is aware of the destruction of a previously created mask, which is the moment of style. Often during these episodes the narrator will color his description of the events with a comparison with one of the visual arts or some sort of optical medium, often cinema or photography. The two photographs of this example are unique and unmoving, but when they are placed side by side they create the illusion of movement. Roger Shattuck notices how stereoscopic vision is at the heart of Proust’s system of character development, his understanding of memory and its role in the search for the truth hidden behind signs: one image is never enough. The depth of understanding that Marcel craves necessitates at least two instances.
Depth, or what in optics is called penetration effect, cannot be found in a single image. The visible world reaches us through continuous double takes based on the stereoscopic principle. Two slightly different versions of the same ‘object’ from our two eyes are combined subjectively with the effect of relief (Shattuck 117).

The moving image, found in Proust’s world as kaleidoscopes, magic lanterns, and cinematographs, provides an appropriate metaphor for the pursuit of knowledge in the novel (Shattuck 127). But the problem behind this double vision is the narrator’s (and the reader’s) inability to achieve a complete, fixed image of the characters he meets. Like the pictures in a cinematograph, which are invariably perceived as moving and ever-changing images, the people Marcel meets are never still or clearly defined, which is exactly how he would like them.

Even when the comparison with the visual arts is made with a single-image medium, such as painting or drawing, Marcel’s reaction is the same. In the second volume he comes across a painting of Odette by the painter Elstir. It is a new yet previous version of Odette, one that “était antérieur au moment où Odette disciplinant ses traits avait fait de son visage et de sa taille cette création dont, à travers les années, ses coiffeurs, ses couturiers, elle-même -dans sa façon de se tenir, de parler, de sourire, de poser ses mains, ses regards, de penser- devaient respecter les grandes lignes” (Proust 481). Marcel initially has trouble recognizing her, as she differs so much from the Odette-as-Swann’s-wife version he and the reader have been seeing thus far. This almost-boyish version is different enough to make recognition difficult, but close enough to elicit a bout of involuntary memory. The Elstir portrait thus recalls a series of photographs that Swann keeps
of his wife. His favorite one depicts her before she becomes a pretentious socialite and a fixture of Parisian salons.

Il fallait la dépravation d'un amant rassasié pour que Swann préférât aux nombreuses photographies de l'Odette ne varietur qu'était sa ravissante femme, la petite photographie qu’il avait dans sa chambre, et où sous un chapeau de paille orné de pensées on voyait une maigre jeune femme assez laide, aux cheveux bouffants, aux traits tires (Proust 481).

The fact that Swann has a preferred version of Odette (different from the carefully crafted one he lives with) is a meaningful revelation. It suggests that he too is aware of the issue of unmasking and multiplication and that the “definitive” Odette” is neither the “real” one nor his favorite. It is also significant that the narrator chooses to use the word “definitive” in quotation marks, an almost ironic admission of his own reservations when it comes to Odette and all women in general. This means that there are three images of Odette coexisting in the narrator’s mind at this time: the Odette from Swann in Love, the one in Swann’s picture and the one in the painting. As the narrator says, “le portrait eût-il été, non pas antérieur, comme la photographie préférée de Swann, à la systématisation des traits d'Odette en un type nouveau, majestueux et charmant, mais postérieur, qu'il eût suffi de la vision d'Elstir pour désorganiser ce type” (Proust 481). This means that the newly discovered version destroys all previous others while at the same time, recalls them in the process. Strictly speaking, there is only one image on the canvas and no connection with any sort of stereoscopic effect or the illusion of motion in optical media.

When compared to kaleidoscopes, magic lanterns and cinemas, the fixed nature of an oil painting should provide Marcel with some sort of concrete understanding of the object of the
painting. But such a thing is impossible because this is entirely a stylistic conceit, which, as was made clear earlier, cannot produce Essence or Truth, only the very same process of unmasking and deciphering. Even if there is only one painting of Odette, there are several versions of her tucked away in his memory. Even a single sign, the painting, forces Marcel to recall several other signs, each of them a mystery he is unable to crack. This suggests that deciphering a sign, a difficult prospect in the best circumstances, is made even more difficult when involuntary memory recalls other signs that must be interpreted simultaneously. So memory is, ironically, both essential to successful truth seeking and a powerful hinderance.

The comparison between images is then involuntary as it is unavoidable. There are always enough versions of a character to allow for stereoscopic vision, which invariably results in an unmasking, a momentary cracking of the sign. This explains Marcel’s reaction to the Odette painting, a combination of awe (which he has felt for her before) and surprise, as he can’t quite recognize her and has yet to discover her homosexuality. When he does, many pages later, this scene will come rushing back and will serve to unmask Albertine as well, if only momentarily.

Additionally, this event also serves to unmask the painter himself. In the previous volume, the Verdurin clan talk mockingly about a painter who used to be part of the flock. Upon seeing Odette’s portrait in the second volume, Marcel realizes they may have been talking about Elstir. His shocked reaction is somewhat puzzling; he has carefully analyzed a similar revelation only a few pages prior, but this instance of unmasking seems to confuse him. “Serait-il possible que cet homme de génie, ce sage, ce solitaire, ce philosophe à la conversation magnifique et qui dominait toutes choses, fût le peintre ridicule et pervers, adopté jadis par les Verdurin?” (Proust 482)

Desire, Joy and, Unmasking: Albertine and Gilberte
This raises questions about how the narrator reacts to each instance of what he calls stereoscopic vision. Whether or not the surprising discovery of yet another facet of a character is a painful or a joyous experience is an important question and, one that Julia Kristeva has already asked with respect to Swann: “Does desire to be disappointed serve as the unconscious impetus leading this cultivated lady’s man to a social-climbing tart with faded looks? Does humiliation go hand in hand with jouissance?” (Kristeva 26) In some instances, the discovery, of a lie, an affair or someone’s Jewishness or homosexuality for example, is as surprising as it is painful, while in others it grants the narrator some much needed peace of mind. Deleuze has already established that the relationship between the sign and the truth seeker is always forceful. However, he fails to ask himself how this agon between sign and decoder actually affects the man of letters during his apprenticeship. How does Marcel react to the momentary glimpse of the truth he is afforded by the juxtaposition of images? A look at how Marcel reacts will provide useful information for this study of Marvel Moreno’s Lina and Alison Bechdel’s Alison.

When he does actually talk about it, it becomes evident that the shattering of masks produces a complex mixture of both joy and pain: “Et la réalité la plus terrible donne, en même temps que la souffrance, la joie d'une belle découverte, parce qu'elle ne fait que donner une forme neuve et claire à ce que nous remâchions depuis longtemps sans nous en douter” (Proust 1141). Surprise and revelation delivers certainty, or at least a temporary sort of sureness over which new masks can be erected. Why this is relevant to the present discussion on unmasking and style becomes evident when the pain it causes is placed in the context of two of the novel’s recurring themes of jealousy and homosexuality. When Albertine, in an attempt to quell Marcel’s suspicions, tells him that she does indeed know Mlle. Vinteuil and her friend (Marcel has spied the two having sex pages before) she inadvertently confirms her homosexuality moments before Marcel is
prepared to end their relationship. When he finds out though, he changes his mind. Instead of driving her further away from him, the revelation and the final destruction of Albertine’s current mask brings them closer together.

Ce qui m’avait brusquement rapproché d’elle, bien plus, fondu en elle, ce n’était pas
l’attente d’un plaisir - et un plaisir est encore trop dire, un léger agrément- c’était l’étreinte
d’une douleur. […]Albertine était plusieurs personnes (Proust 1323)

The final certainty of Albertine’s multiplicity, which had been hinted at practically at every one of her appearances, fills Marcel with pain, but that pain is a small price to pay in exchange for certainty, even if it is the certainty of impossibility. And although this appears to be a conclusion of five volumes of rumination, it is by no means the end of the discussion. Marcel will continue, until the last pages of the book, trying to dissect his characters with equal measures of pleasure and pain. In terms of style, this sentence has all the markings of a typical proustian sentence involved in the process of unmasking. It begins with an initial certainty, the way he feels drawn towards her. The phrase “draw me close” and the word “pleasure” color this initial stance as a positive experience. Then, as it often happens, the sentence meanders with two dependent clauses that gradually undo the initial sensation. The end is a complete departure from the beginning and the words “agonizing pain” stand in strong contrast with the pleasure mentioned earlier. This sentence structure mirrors the structure of character development that begins with a strong attraction (this time to Albertine), meanders towards disappointment as the initial pleasure fades and eventually becomes agonizing pain as the mask is finally shattered. The sentence that follows,
short and blunt, is also typical, as an important unmasking is marked by a reflection on the multiplicity of individuals or the nature of pursuit of definitive knowledge in a changing world.

Thus, Albertine’s role in the dynamics of discovery becomes essential. And, much like Albertine, Odette is multiplied almost ad infinitum, appearing first as the lady in pink, then as Swann’s lover, later as Gilberte’s mother and, then the subject of Elstir’s painting (Proust 482) without counting the numerous revelations of her previous and current affairs, which in a way, also unmask her. Why these women are continuously multiplied and what the overall process of masking and unmasking means for the structure of the novel is yet to be seen. It seems as if the women who become objects of desire for Marcel (and for Swann who, in Un amour de Swann, serves as a stand in of sorts for Marcel) are desirable precisely because they are vectors of signification; every meeting with them seems to lead to more and more signs that need to be wrestled open. This would certainly explain Swann’s surreptitious disdain for all versions of Odette and Marcel’s pervasive feeling of unease whenever he meets Albertine.

While a relatively minor character like Dr. Cottard has just two masks, the idiotic, grinning member of the Verdurin clan and the highly admired physician of later volumes, others have masks that are created and destroyed almost as many times as they appear in the novel. Interestingly enough, it is the women, objects of desire, who are most often multiplied by their unmasking. Odette and Albertine have so many different versions that the narrator becomes so aware of their multiplicity that he has to comment on it. As a matter of fact, almost every time the novel addresses the issue of multiplication, it does so as a result of an appearance of either woman. The narrator very quickly realizes, only a few pages after meeting Albertine for the first time, the astonishment he feels and, is condemned to feel, every time he sees her. As he explains it to himself after a visit to Elstir’s in which he has failed to recognize the Albertine he had previously met in the one
standing before him, Marcel takes his first steps towards realizing the importance that multiplication and unmasking have when it comes to dealing with the objects of his desire. As he starts to understand it, he realizes that the confusion he feels every time he sees Albertine is

né de la différence […] entre l'être que nous avons vu la dernière fois, et celui qui nous apparaît aujourd'hui sous un autre angle, nous montrant un nouvel aspect. Le visage humain est vraiment comme celui du Dieu d'une théogénie orientale, toute une grappe de visages juxtaposés dans des plans différents et qu'on ne voit pas à la fois (Proust 510).

There is no pain in this realization, only curiosity. As he delves deeper into his relationship with Albertine and he is slowly consumed by his jealousy, Marcel slowly comes to understand that the human face’s juxtaposition of images is not only an interesting phenomenon but rather the defining characteristic of his relationship with women and one of the essential structural devices for the novel of his life. Much later, in the fifth volume, Marcel reaches a much more profound understanding of unmasking and multiplication. It forces a realization about language and a character's apparently unattainable oneness. Speaking about the astonishment he feels every time he meets Albertine and Andrée, Marcel finally realizes that

À chaque fois, une jeune fille ressemble si peu à ce qu'elle était la fois précédente (mettant en pièces dès que nous l'apercevons le souvenir que nous avions gardé et le désir que nous nous proposions), que la stabilité de nature que nous lui prêtons n'est que fictive et pour la commodité du langage. (Proust 1179, my emphasis)
The logical conclusion is that, if unity and stability are constructions created within the world of language, then the act of destroying it in order to create an alternative mask, itself doomed to be shattered later, must also be a stylistic conceit, a convention of language used by the only person to control language in the novel, its narrator. This realization comes about fairly late in the book, but the observant reader will notice that the process has been taking place, both stylistically and thematically, since the first pages.

Unmasking and the Sentence

The last volume offers the clearest example that demonstrates how the back-and-forth motion of acquaintance, discovery, unmasking (or decoding), and, apparent (although inevitably temporary) certainty takes place. Towards the end of the novel both reader and narrator discover that Saint-Loup, one of the narrator’s closest friends, is not only a homosexual but is also attracted to dark-skinned men. In fact, Marcel asks “On imagine très bien dans cette famille si ancienne un grand seigneur blond, doré, intelligent, doué de tous les prestiges et recelant à fond de cale un goût secret, ignoré de tous, pour les nègres” (Proust 1510). The relationship between the mask and the invert (the novel’s code word for homosexual) had already been thoroughly explored in the beginning of the fourth volume, but it is in this passage that the relationship between the actual sentence structure and the manner of revelation appears most clearly. The sentence, short by Proustian standards, begins with a series of adjectives that call attention, in no uncertain terms, to Saint-Loup’s noble origin, intelligence and even classical beauty. Terms like “grand seigneur blond, doré”, “famille si ancienne” and “prestiges” start the reader in one direction which appears to suggest a very definitive understanding of the character. This is his original mask. As the reader starts, Saint-Loup’s aristocracy and conventional looks and appetites seem as undeniable as they
are unchangeable; even the color of his hair seems to guarantee it. But the sentence inevitably takes a turn, a swerve or *clinamen* that is at the heart of this process. The bright, blue-blooded words of the beginning stand in stark contrast to the shocking, almost sensual revelation: “a secret taste for negroes”. The initial mask is shattered. A second, contradictory mask has replaced it and this action has occurred as a result of the sentence’s particular structure.

There is therefore an undeniable connection between the use of language and the structure of discovery. To understand how it works and how the novel is organized around it, the reader (and the critic) must focus on the problem of style. There would be no point in attempting to summarize or surpass the work of Julia Kristeva and the libraries written about Proust and his particular kind of sentence. However it is safe to say that in simple terms the proustian sentence functions by creating tension between its beginning, its end and the beginning of the following sentence.

The third volume offers one of many examples that can clarify how this communion between sentence structure and the overarching structural principle of unmasking and discovery works. In the following passage, Marcel discovers something about Françoise, the family servant. It has little impact on his feelings, but it serves to demonstrate how easily the narrator places an image in the reader’s eyes only to replace it with a contradictory one. In this instance, the creation and destruction take place from one sentence to the next, and so will serve nicely to demonstrate Proust’s use of the “bait-and-switch” conceit that has been discussed thus far. As it will be seen, the famous proustian sentence would be the ideal structural device for the novel. These sentences begin with an apparent certainty (the original mask) followed by an extended run-around of dependent clauses followed by a surprising conclusion, a double process of defacing the previous mask and creating a new one:
Quand Françoise, le soir, était gentille avec moi, me demandait la permission de s'asseoir dans ma chambre, il me semblait que son visage devenait transparent et que j'apercevais en elle la bonté et la franchise (Proust 563).

The first sentence of the paragraph offers what appear to be two clear-cut certainties. First, that the old servant honestly loves, or at least likes, her master. Second and perhaps more shocking given that this takes place well after Albertine has been introduced and Marcel has commented on several occasions on the multiplicity of people (especially women), that she is somehow transparent and that both narrator and reader can see what “lies beneath”. This constitutes the first mask, the initial version of the character in this instance (she has appeared before in previous volumes). As she is shown to the reader in this sentence, she is unchangeable. Immediately though, things begin to shift. The sentence that immediately follows begins with a “but”, one of the many adversative logical connectors that appear at the beginning of Proust’s sentences. The sentence continues with the presentation of a discovery, made much later and introduced in a typically proustian meandering of commas and subordinate clauses, that hints at a conclusion very different from the one that is actually coming.

Mais Jupien, lequel avait des parties d'indiscrétion que je ne connus que plus tard, révéla depuis qu'elle disait que je ne valais pas la corde pour me pendre et que j'avais cherché à lui faire tout le mal possible (Proust 563).
The mention of Jupien sets up the reader on a different path, perhaps one that will meander towards that character. But, again, the sentence swerves in the clauses and delivers an unexpected punch that effectively unmaskes the previously transparent Françoise. Short though this example may be, it does offer a sort of condensed exposition of a format that structures the entire novel and, because of its sheer expansiveness, spanning hundreds of pages, becomes difficult to squeeze into a block quote. The initial certainty quickly disappears with an almost comical swiftness. The transparent and loving servant has suddenly become a hateful deceiver that, on top of everything, talks to her friends about her master’s shortcomings behind his back. The metaphorical references to photography and visual language quickly follow to complement yet another realization of the same principle:

Ces paroles de Jupien tirèrent aussitôt devant moi, dans une teinte inconnue, une épreuve de mes rapports avec Françoise si différente de celle sur laquelle je me complaisais souvent à reposer mes regards et où, sans la plus légère indécision, Françoise m’adorait et ne perdait pas une occasion de me célebrer, que je compris que ce n’est pas le monde physique seul qui diffère de l’aspect sous lequel nous le voyons ; que toute réalité est peut-être aussi dissemblable de celle que nous croyons percevoir directement, que les arbres, le soleil et le ciel ne seraient pas tels que nous les voyons, s’ils étaient connus par des êtres ayant des yeux autrement constitués que les nôtres, ou bien possédant pour cette besogne des organes autres que des yeux et qui donneraient des arbres, du ciel et du soleil des équivalents mais non visuels (Proust 563).
The sentence begins where the previous one left off, with the words “every conceivable harm” still hanging in the air. The second mask Françoise wears becomes the new standard and the basis for an almost faith-like conviction in its finality. As it can be expected though, this certainty lasts little and is immediately followed by this longer, more convoluted, sentence complete with fanciful considerations about the nature of eyesight and perception. After what appears to be the conclusion of these musings the narrator adds a “Telle qu’elle fut”, another adversative logical connection, that by now should be expected since any indication of a conclusion suggests, in fact, another disappointment in the future. Additionally, the rumination on eyesight also follows the unmasking principle of style: it begins with vocabulary that strongly suggests the importance of visual perception, is interrupted by the usual ebb and flow of commas and digressions and ends with the certainty that all perception is flawed. As the passage continues, again the narrator checks his reaction.

Telle qu'elle fut, cette brusque échappée que m'ouvrit une fois Jupien sur le monde réel m'épouvanta. Encore ne s'agissait-il que de Françoise dont je ne me souciais guère. En était-il ainsi dans tous les rapports sociaux ? Et jusqu'à quel désespoir cela pourrait-il me mener un jour, s'il en était de même dans l'amour ? C'était le secret de l'avenir (Proust 563)

At this point, the character Marcel cannot fully appreciate the importance of this discovery, but the narrator is very aware of the implications it will have, pointing to the following volume and the depths of despair Marcel will explore with his relationship to Albertine in *The Captive* and *The Fugitive*. The future’s secret, as he calls it, will eventually make itself known, and at this point the narrator leaves off with this short sentence that by virtue of its length and lack of hesitation
sets up a conclusion perfect for a subsequent revision: “Alors, il ne s'agissait encore que de Françoise” (563). The truth seeker in Marcel knows that, even though he appears to have achieved his task of decoding a sign (if an unimportant one at that), there is little hope of eventually finding the Truth he is truly hoping for. This suspicion of impossibility, which appears often in the face of the disappointment brought about by an unmasking, does little to sway Marcel of his search. He suspects that every mask yields only other masks, but never loses hope in eventually ripping off the final one. The novel depends on a careful reader that will remember this moment, and especially this short sentence, the next time it becomes apparent that, as the narrator predicted, Françoise is not the only person who hides countless versions beneath her skin and that writing is the only way to unmask them.

Involuntary Memory, Style, and Unmasking

By demanding attention and retention from the reader in instances like this one, the novel uses its stylistic choices to accomplish its goal of remembrance. When the reader, and presumably Marcel, the narrator and Proust with him, encounter a shocking revelation about a character or a situation they are forced to remember everything they knew about him or her. The confrontation with an unexpected version of someone instantly recalls all previous versions and assumptions about that person, and even if they become moot in the light of new revelations, they involuntarily come rushing back, all at once and condensed into a fleeting moment of shock and remembrance.

These moments of unmasking happen often and are hardwired into the style and the sentence structure. And since every instance of unmasking is also an instance of involuntary memory, a close look at the style of the novel’s most famous passage will prove to be revealing.
Et bientôt, machinalement, accablé par la morne journée et la perspective d'un triste lendemain, je portai à mes lèvres une cuillerée du thé où j'avais laissé s'amollir un morceau de madeleine. Mais à l'instant même où la gorgée mêlée des miettes du gâteau toucha mon palais, je tressaillis, attentif à ce qui se passait d'extraordinaire en moi. Un plaisir délicieux m'avait envahi, isolé, sans la notion de sa cause. Il m'avait aussitôt rendu les vicissitudes de la vie indifférentes, ses désastres inoffensifs, sa brièveté illusoire, de la même façon qu'opère l'amour, en me remplissant d'une essence précieuse (Proust 24).

Here, the taste and smell of the cookie famously recall Marcel’s childhood, which comes rushing back after they touch his lips. But the recall is not instantaneous. It takes the narrator several tries with the tea-soaked cookie, and a distinct feeling of doubt spread across three pages, before the remembrance comes rushing back.

Et tout d'un coup le souvenir m'est apparu. Ce goût, c'était celui du petit morceau de madeleine que le dimanche matin à Combray (parce que ce jour-là je ne sortais pas avant l'heure de la messe), quand j'allais lui dire bonjour dans sa chambre, ma tante Léonie m'offrait après l'avoir trempé dans son infusion de thé ou de tilleul (Proust 25).

This moment serves to illustrate the way in which the issue of involuntary memory behaves in the novel and is closely tied to the particularities of Proust’s style and language. The passage where he first tastes the cookie starts with vocabulary that stresses his current depression, which will, after a middle part of the sentence, become a great pleasure that slowly becomes much more than physical, as the sentence ends with the evocative suggestion of a “precious essence”. This “essence” is, of course, what the truth seeker is after. He may think he catches glimpses of it during
the moments bienheureux, when involuntary memory becomes essential (despite Deleuze’s dismissal of it) to the process of unmasking.

Thus, from this seminal moment onwards, involuntary memory becomes a staple of the proustian sentence by virtue of the principle of unmasking. This means that the process of the madeleine event repeats itself in almost every page, as the narrator comes upon people, places and events as he has never seen them before and is suddenly assaulted by his previous experiences of them. In a way then, the tea-soaked cookie suffers the same fate as Albertine, Saint Loup and practically everyone else. Its initial mask, established years before the present of the novel when Marcel is a child, is shattered when he tastes it years later. The immediate effect of this shattering is the surge of a hard-to-explain sensorial pleasure. The typical drive to fully understand every phenomenon follows and then, in typical Proustian fashion, a short, blunt sentence that marks a moment of great importance: “And suddenly the memory revealed itself”. The madeleine, Combray, aunt Léonie and Marcel himself become instantly more complex as the unmasking takes place: the tour of the childhood town that begins in this section is the construction of their new masks, which will, of course, be shattered again later on.

Several hundred pages later, at the beginning of the fourth volume, in the famous scene with the flower and the bumblebee, Marcel realizes that Charlus is a homosexual and Jupien’s lover. Another unmasking takes place, and by this time the narrator is better equipped to analyze it. He has experienced several such situations, but is still fascinated by the phenomenon.

la transmutation de M. de Charlus en une personne nouvelle était si complète, que non seulement les contrastes de son visage, de sa voix, mais rétrospectivement les hauts et les bas eux-mêmes de ses relations avec moi, tout ce qui avait paru jusque-là incohérent à mon
esprit, devenaient intelligibles, se montraient évidents, comme une phrase, n'offrant aucun sens tant qu'elle reste décomposée en lettres disposées au hasard, exprime, si les caractères se trouvent replacés dans l'ordre qu'il faut, une pensée que l'on ne pourra plus oublier (Proust 877)

The discovery serves to unmask the baron and is as surprising as any other discovery in the novel, but this shattering of masks calls attention to the way remembrance, style and discovery come together. Sentences that bring about revelations have the power to correct the past. They actualize memories by bringing them back from the past and adding to them the newly revealed information. In this case, the mask that Charlus had been wearing, that of a respectable albeit eccentric aristocrat the reader met late in A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, is destroyed and replaced by that of the invert who finds a lover in the lowly Jupien. The destruction, as the narrator comments, leaves an unforgettable impression, but also makes previous impressions untrustworthy and incoherent, but also unforgettable. Both masks simply cannot be forgotten because their introduction involved a process of surprise and discovery irrevocably tied to the novel’s basic fabric. When the second was created, it recalled the first, and it is relevant and especially poignant precisely because it exists in a tense relationship with the first. In this way, the shattering of a mask preserves it. Once the reader has been surprised with this new Charlus, he cannot forget him. He cannot forget the version that preceded him nor the moment in which the discovery was made either. In this way, paradoxically perhaps, destruction and surprise become elements of conservation and remembrance. This process is what allows for the sudden and unexpected return of previously forgotten events and sensations. Without the multiple versions of, for example, the grandmother, who goes through several of them because of the business with the photograph and
later with her sickness, the abrupt return of her memory in the room at Balbec, a year after her death, could not be possible:

Puis les doux souvenirs me revenaient. Elle était ma grand'mère et j'étais son petit-fils. [...] tout d'un coup, je pensai de nouveau : « C'est grand'mère, je suis son petit-fils », comme un amnésique retrouve son nom, comme un malade change de personnalité (Proust 863).

These sentences are shocking in part because of their length. Surrounded by the typical proustian sentence, their brevity makes them sound final, conclusive. And unlike the previously quoted short sentence, these do not allow for revision or surprise. Despite any and all revelations about her, the woman will always be Marcel’s grandmother. This means that there is indeed hope of a certain kind of stability in life when it comes to Marcel’s knowledge of people.

Characters, places, and experiences in Marcel’s world are ultimately unknowable and any discovery about them is always followed by a sudden, usually shocking, disappointment. But the process of unmasking and discovery is what encourages Marcel, the narrator, and the reader to continue behaving like detectives in search of the ultimate clue. His obsession leads him to compare himself with all manner of people dedicated analyzing and discovering others, such as detectives, artists, writers, photographers, entomologists, historians and even doctors. As the narrator reiterates in the final volume, he studies people like a surgeon. “J'avais beau dîner en ville, je ne voyais pas les convives, parce que quand je croyais les regarder je les radiographiais” (Proust 1517). This is yet another comparison with a comparatively modern optical medium and one that stresses Marcel’s desire to shed all external trappings and find whatever is solid underneath. His
grandmother’s oneness is so disarming because it is the first (and will prove the last) time in which a character has a concrete, completely reliable and unchanging underpinning. The problem is that the moment Marcel finds the essence of the character (“She was my grandmother and I was her grandson”) comes a year after her death, when the certainty is painfully and ironically too late.

The world of the *Recherche* is inherently multiple, made up of characters who never show their true selves all at once and a narrator who can’t see them in their totality. The protagonist, and with him the reader, wants nothing more than to grasp the world in its entirety, to pin down the people he knows unto some sort of stability. It is a desire destined to go unfulfilled. Everything in the novel, from its most basic building block, the sentence, to the overarching themes of desire, jealousy, homosexuality, and memory, are designed to work against the possibility of total knowledge and stability of meaning. It all seems to make for a bleak picture and a thoroughly pessimistic novel. At first glance, it would appear to be impossible to know the world and the people in it because of their incessant multiplication.

Since the motion of deception and discovery appears to be ingrained in the novel’s form as well as its content, it follows that stability and certainty are impossible. However, this doesn’t mean that the novel’s outlook is necessarily pessimistic. The structure of unmasking provides a glimmer of hope. As long as the perplexing world of ever multiplying people and situations is subordinated to a system designed to flesh out the differences between contradictory versions of the same person and ultimately reconcile them, the possibility of oneness and certainty can exist. Interestingly, the only system equipped to delve into the complexities of a character, find the underlying contradictions, and somehow reconcile them is, unsurprisingly, literature. Of all the métiers that could lead to a deeper understanding of others (and also of himself), that of the writer, and especially the novelist, is the most promising. By exploring the uses of language and
experimenting with the construction of sentences, Proust eventually finds the format that allows him to marry his thematic interests with a specific stylistic choice. This eventually leads Marcel to the novel’s ultimate realization. It fittingly comes during the final volume, when Marcel finally recognizes that the entire *Recherche* has been the preparation for his becoming a novelist. The result of his obsession with delving deeply into the people he meets and the effect of the constant unmaskings are his becoming a novelist. The novel then is, at its heart, a *Kunstlerroman*.

Jean Milly understands that, from his manipulation of language, Proust betrays his desire to seek, or at least create, some semblance of stability in his life. The only way to achieve this is, of course, through writing, and specifically with the type of writing that has been discussed so far. According to Milly, the proustian sentence

> extrait [...] deux éléments distincts, mais présentant une analogie, et les combine en un ‘objet’, ‘l’alliance de mots’, ‘où les deux choses ‘sont attachées’; le rapport ainsi établi ‘immobilise’ les deux sensations. C’est pour lutter contre la fragilité des apparences, l’instabilité de la vie psychologique, l’érosion de temps, que Proust élabore un art dont le fondement est la stabilité, ou du moins une stabilization relative (Milly 90).

By creating a seemingly complete characterization of a person only to undo it, sometimes just a few pages later, and sometimes a few volumes later, the narrator gives the reader, and probably himself, something to expect, a sort of certainty that gives him a feeling of security in a world that seems to produce so much angst. In this way, surprises, deceptions and disappointments become, paradoxically, the sources of tranquility and predictability. They also provide ways of remembering, and pinning down elusive characters by condensing all previous and current versions of them into the instant of revelation. Thus, Albertine’s multiple identities, for example,
are condensed into a single instant every time she is unmasked. This movement from certainty to uncertainty and the paradoxical kind of relief that comes when the unexpected is predictably revealed is a result of writing. Hope, or the possibility of some sort of stable grasp on the world, appears in the form of writing at the end of the novel. The subjects of time and provide the perfect proving ground for the specific kind of style required by Marcel’s search for truth. The long sentences allows for digressions and these in turn allow the narrator’s intelligence to slowly peel away at each sign. As Deleuze explains it, “it is in the meanders and rings of an anti-Logos style that it makes the requisite detours in order to gather up the ultimate fragments, to sweep along at different speeds all the pieces, each one of which refers to a different whole, to no whole at all, or to no other whole than that of style” (Deleuze 95).

It takes Marcel six long volumes to realize that literature, the writing, reading and rereading of his life as well as that of the people around him, offers the only way of condensing and gripping the elusive world around him, and this is only possible through a kind of writing where style is carefully crafted and put in the service of extracting the truth out of each impression, “le style, pour l’écrivain aussi bien que pour le peintre, est une question non de technique, mais de vision. Il est la révélation, qui serait impossible par des moyens directs et conscients, de la différence qualitative qu’il y a dans la façon dont nous apparaît le monde, différence qui, s’il n’y avait pas l’art, resterait le secret éternel de chacun” (Proust 1608).
Chapter 2: Desire and the Search for Truth in *En diciembre llegaban las brisas*

**Introduction**

Marvel Moreno’s 1987 novel *En diciembre llegaban las brisas* is one of Latin America’s least studied masterpieces. Its unrepentant stylistic difficulty as well as its brutal attack against the city's misogynistic, racist, prudish, and violent attitudes made it unpopular amongst readers still swooning over a magical-realist depiction of the Caribbean and García Márquez’s 1982 Nobel Prize win. Lina, the novel’s protagonist-narrator, lives as an exile in Paris and is a literary version of Moreno herself. Divided into three sections, each dedicated to one of Lina’s female friends, the narration is a tour of Barranquilla’s society in the 1940s and 50s through the lives of Dora, Catalina and Beatriz as they, intelligent and beautiful women, are pitted against a society that seems designed to crush them. The world they inhabit in Barranquilla both delights in and punishes women’s sexual desire.

Lina has one singular desire, but it is not necessarily a sexual one. She wants, more than anything, to understand her friends and the society in which they reach adulthood in Barranquilla. Desire, the impulse that cannot and should not be controlled, is one of the novel’s main theoretical axes as it serves to guide Lina’s role as a witness of her friend’s coming of age. Desire also guides the structure of the entire novel, both in terms of style and philosophical concern. As Freddy Téllez points out, “*En diciembre* es una novela ‘sobre’ el deseo, los instintos y toda la larga, penosa y sangrienta historia a su alrededor” (Téllez 161).
At the start of the third chapter of the first part, Lina remembers her grandmother’s words. As it will become apparent, Lina’s grandmother (and her aunts in the second and third parts of the novel) serves a dual purpose in the narrative: she delivers a prophetic view of the events that follow, and lays a theoretical groundwork of sorts. In a way, the beginning of each chapter\(^2\) provides everything the reader will need to make sense of the narrative from the point of view of the grandmother or the aunts, foremothers who seem to possess an almost mythical wisdom.

Al principio no había sido el Verbo, decía su abuela, porque antes del Verbo había habido la acción y antes de la acción el deseo. En su origen cualquier deseo era y sería siempre puro, anterior a la palabra, ajeno a toda consideración de orden moral; tenía en sí mismo la facultad de equilibrarse, poseía de manera natural un preciso y certero mecanismo de regulación (Moreno 65).

Most critical responses to Moreno’s work see passages such as this one as a vindication of sexual desire (specifically female sexual desire) and a very open attack on patriarchal society that simultaneously exalts and condemns all desire\(^3\). Elizabeth Burgos, for instance, suggests that in Moreno’s work, desire is always tied to the woman’s body, either as an expression of her own discovery of sexual urges or patriarchal society’s attempt to control them.

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\(^2\) For a detailed look into the structure and effect of each chapter’s *incipit*, see Téllez.

\(^3\) See Abdala-Mesa, Osorio, Gómez de Gonzáles, and especially Araújo for other critical work focused on the role of sexual desire and sexual repression in Moreno’s works. Blanca Gómez de Gonzáles, for example, suggests that “El universo narrativo de Marvel Moreno se cifra en tres elementos recurrentes: el erotismo, la abyección y el enjuiciamiento de la sociedad” (Gómez de Gonzáles, “La Palabra Como Reescritura Del Destino” 139).
En su obra, la expresión del deseo aparece siempre nítido, preciso, franco, con toda la crudeza del despertar del sexo. Porque, al describir con precisión ese mundo hipócrita en el que viven sus heroínas, su propósito es también expresar la verdad íntima del cuerpo de la mujer en su relación con el deseo, y el hallazgo del cuerpo del hombre (Burgos 103).

However, this chapter will suggest that there is an understanding of the nature of desire that goes far beyond physical gratification or feminine liberation. In fact, the passage of the novel quoted above indicates that desire is too important a concept to be exclusively tied to sexuality. As this chapter will show, the type of desire that gives form to Moreno’s novel and determines its stylistic particularities is the desire for truth. This means that the tension at the core of the novel is not, as previous scholarship has claimed, between sexual desire and its repression (and the social and emotional effects this has on women), but rather the tension between knowing and not knowing. This is the pure, incorruptible longing that antecedes both action and word; in Moreno’s world, desire, or the search for truth, is structure.

Writing in exile from Paris, the narrator-protagonist embarks on an unstoppable quest for the ever-hidden truth about her friends, Dora, Catalina, and Beatriz. This quest is in many ways equivalent to Marcel’s in Proust’s À la recherche du temps perdu. In both novels, the narrator-protagonists are sensitive youths that face an oppressive world made up of signs they must decipher in order to fulfill their quests. Taking up Deleuze’s reading of Proust and the concept of “proustian truth seekers”, introduced in the previous chapter, this section proposes a reading of Moreno in terms of Lina’s desire for truth and her education in the decoding of signs that ultimately lead her to it.
Like Marcel, Lina learns to decipher the world of signs that surrounds her. Like Marcel, her education in signs is propelled by her curiosity and is chronicled in the novel she ultimately writes. Both Lina and Marcel inadvertently become novelists because of their apprenticeship in signs, and, in both, the process of decoding has a profound effect on the style of their work, in its overarching structure as well as in the form of each individual sentence.

Regardless, it would be impossible and ill-advised to completely ignore the role that female sexuality (and its relationship with a patriarchal society) plays in Moreno’s novel and Lina’s search for truth. Sarah de Mojica suggests that, relegated to trivial and marginal spaces in society, “la mujer desarrolla una capacidad para leer signos” (de Mojica 244). This is an important point because it suggests that woman, and Lina more specifically, develops her ability to decode signs precisely because she lives in an oppressive medium that restricts and punishes curiosity. In a world in which sex, desire, and curiosity are forbidden, they do not simply cease to exist. Instead, they become sublimated in signs that must be deciphered.

It would be equally ill-advised to suggest that Lina and Marcel are identical truth seekers. While they share an identical feeling of curiosity that drives their every interaction with the world, Lina and Marcel differ as proustian truth seekers in three key ways. First, the nature of their desire; second, the object of their desire; and finally, the way in which truth seeking determines their style and the structure of their texts.

However, before attempting a description of Lina’s desire for truth and its effects on style, this chapter will require a brief review of its theoretical underpinnings. First, an understanding of the way in which Deleuze’s reading of Proust provides the backbone for the definition of a
proustian truth seeker. Subsequently, an understanding of the concept of desire, as it is understood in philosophical/theoretical terms as well as sociological terms will be essential to this reading of *En diciembre llegaban las brisas*. Finally, this chapter will propose a look at how style, particularly the structure of many of Moreno’s sentences, is itself a textual embodiment of truth-seeking and how femininity is also expressed as textual difference.

Theoretical underpinnings: Deleuze and Truth Seekers, Femininity and Desire

According to Deleuze’s work on Proust in *Proust and Signs*, the key to understanding Proust’s novel is not memory or time, but signs and the protagonist’s ability to read and decode them. The proustian truth seeker, as has been defined in the previous chapter, is precisely the protagonist who, when faced with a world made up of signs, must learn to decipher them in a process that becomes his, or in these cases, her, emotional and artistic education. In this way, the truth seeker’s apprenticeship into the world of signs turns her into a master of decoding. There is no truth seeker, that is to say, an apprentice, who does not become, in one way or another, an artist. This is something Deleuze realizes when it comes to the *Recherche*. In that novel, he argues that, “what is involved is not an exposition of involuntary memory, but the narrative of an apprenticeship: more precisely, the apprenticeship of a man of letters” (Deleuze 3). As this chapter will show, this is also true of Moreno’s *En diciembre*. This is not an exposition of patriarchal oppression or female sexuality, but the narration of the apprenticeship of a woman of letters.

Lina’s apprenticeship will lead her down the same path it leads Marcel and will later lead Allison. As a result of their apprenticeship, they all become writers. This is because signs, in the violence they use to hide the truth and the violence required to, in a way, pry them open to reveal
it, force the truth seeker to create. And while the truth seekers studied here delve into or are fascinated by the visual arts, they all turn towards the literary text as the artistic work that best suits their desire for a truth they know they cannot truly acquire. The truth seeker, as Deleuze describes her, is

the reader, the auditor, in that the work of art emits signs that will perhaps force him to create, like the call of genius to other geniuses. [...] Philosophy, with all its method and its goodwill, is nothing compared to the secret pressures of the work of art. Creation, like the genesis of the act of thinking, always starts from signs. The work of art is born from signs as much as it generates them; the creator is like the jealous man, interpreter of the god, who scrutinizes the signs in which the truth betrays itself. (Deleuze 98)

And much like in Proust, this work of art takes the form of a novel in which style becomes the textual embodiment of the desire for truth and the truth seeker’s quest. This suggests that these novels work in a cycle of sorts: the protagonist is forced to create by the presence of signs that she is forced to decode. But all she can create is signs in the form of text, signs that in turn must be deciphered by a reader who is curious and stubborn enough to become an apprentice in the novel’s style. Only by mimicking the narrator’s journey can the reader attempt to decipher the text’s signs. In a way, the reader in a novel that features a proustian truth seeker is forced to become, to use Deleuze’s word, an “Egyptologist” of the novel. And since the only access the reader has into the world of the novel is through its style, style itself becomes the sign that hides the novel’s central concerns. In fact, style can serve an almost narrative role in itself. It betrays the narrator’s real desire for truth and serves to give shape to her apprenticeship.
Lina’s desire to comprehend her friends, their partners, Barranquilla society and, in a way, the entirety of the human condition in them, drives the narrative forward. In an early passage, in which the reader is first introduced to Benito Suárez, Dora’s husband, the narrator describes the moment in which he bursts into her life and piques her interest with his violent treatment of her friend.

Porque Lina lo conocía. Lo había conocido un sábado de carnaval en circunstancias más bien insólitas, aunque este adjetivo, utilizado por Lina deliberadamente al referirle después lo sucedido a su abuela con el fin de no verse acusada de exageración, ni de lejos ni de cerca correspondía a la escandalosa manera de Benito Suárez había surgido ante ella, irrumpiendo en su vida y allí instalándose, pues a partir de ese momento, y dada su amistad con Dora, a Lina no le cupo la menor duda de que aquel hombre iba a cruzar más de una vez su camino y siempre para provocarle el mismo asombro, y a veces, la misma helada rabia que sintió al verle detener su Studebaker en la esquina, salir de él, y perseguir a Dora que ya había descendido con la cara llena de sangre y corría ciegamente hacia la puerta principal de su casa. (Moreno 20)

The first sentence in this passage is short and almost blunt. It leaves no room for doubt or question: she knew him. This certainty, however, is short-lived for truth seekers. The short sentence is followed by an extremely long one in which the narrator relates not only what happened when she first met Benito, but also the way she would feel when she met him in subsequent occasions. In this same sentence, the narrator also ponders Lina’s choice of the adjective she would later use to describe the circumstances to her grandmother. The certainty of the initial sentence is shattered when the narrator realizes that her choice, insólitas, is shown to be deficient. Lina does not, in fact, know Benito (or Dora). She will continue to observe them with a combination of rage and
astonishment. Her desire to find the best way to describe the two and their relationship betrays Lina’s eventual end as an artist whose primary medium is the written word.

This is the only thing she knows for sure: she and Benito will continue to cross paths and she will always be astonished by him. With this newfound certainty, she completes the typical sentence structure that embodies the proustian truth seeker’s desire for truth or complete knowledge. As was shown in Proust’s sentences, the back and forth motion, from certainty to doubt to realization and apparent certainty is one of the ways in which style serves to underscore the nature of these novels which depict an apprenticeship in signs that is structured around disappointment and unmasking.

Additionally, this passage also illustrates the way in which time functions in the novel. Without shifting from one sentence to another, the text simultaneously covers at least four time periods: a present, when Benito’s car pulls up to the house and Dora jumps out as he beats her; a future in which Lina recounts the events to her grandmother; yet another future in which Lina realizes she will struggle to understand Benito and Dora and, finally, a future from which an older Lina, the writer, considers the scene. Her presence as a character who serves as the novel’s focal point, a character about whom the reader learns almost nothing, is further complicated by the fact that she is apparently not the narrator. Lina is a witness and it is through her eyes that the reader experiences the text, written entirely in the third person. She is, however, the first-person narrator of the epilogue in which she claims, many years later, to have written a novel about her friends in Barranquilla. While most of Moreno’s criticism seems to conflate the third person narrator with Moreno herself, this chapter suggests that Lina is the narrator in En diciembre and that the choice
of third-person narration, instead of the first-person common in other proustian truth seeker accounts (in Proust and Bechdel), follows a certain stylistic choice that will be explored below.

Lastly, the passage ends with the closing of the initial narrative clause by showing a bloodied Dora running towards the front door. This final, violent, image is in stark contrast to the almost musing tone of the start of the sentence in which Lina carefully chooses an adjective that would fit her story just right. This tension, between the beginning of the sentence and its conclusion, is a hallmark of Moreno’s style. It is also a common occurrence in texts with proustian truth seekers. What is particularly telling in this passage is the awareness Lina seems to have of the importance of language and the role it plays in her apprenticeship. She not only considers the quality of the adjective (which the narrator makes a point to say she used deliberately), she also considers her grandmother’s reaction to it and the possibility she might accuse Lina of exaggeration. This, hyperbole of any sort, is the last thing a truth seeker could want, as it would become yet another layer of language that might hide the truth.

On the other hand, much in the same way in which style embodies truth-seeking behavior, especially in the tension between the start and the end of the sentence, the particularities of the female voice also appear in the form, apart from the content. The fact that Moreno is a woman, writing about women and, especially, their fraught relationship with their patriarchal society, has been a key point in previous scholarship about her work. Although this chapter is not necessarily concerned with Moreno’s intersections with feminism, there is an important distinction that must be made here, not only concerning Moreno, but also Bechdel. All three writers have truth seekers as protagonists or narrators, and they are all women. The gender difference, while interesting and important for other types of scholarship, provides less insight for this one. There is, however, a
relevant distinction that can be made here. Moreno’s and Lina’s femininity is not a matter of gender but rather a question of style. By focusing on the ways in which these female narrators deal with their environments through the style and create the feminine experience in language rather than attempting a reading of the texts based on a nebulous, preconceived notion of the female experience, this dissertation can focus on textual evidence. Ludmilla Damjanova has realized the possible problems of reading Moreno’s work by searching for evidence of a “female voice”: “La diferencia sexual literaria no debería comprenderse como biológica […] sino como un problema lingüístico y semiótico” (Damjanova 108). This way of approaching not only Moreno’s text but also Bechdel’s will prove useful, especially because the notions that are essential here, desire, the search for truth and, apprenticeship, can be traced linguistically and stylistically in their relationship with signs.

However, Damjanova also claims that female experience can, in fact, be detected in moments of the narration in which there is “una toma de conciencia” (Damjanova 108) from Lina. This complicates things for Damjanova as her reading of En diciembre fails to adequately point out where exactly Lina “becomes aware” or what precisely is “female” about her experience and her writing other than the obvious attacks on patriarchal violence against women. And while Damjanova proposes empathy between the narrator and her characters as a way to access this feminine voice, she fails to fully explain what makes this empathy particularly female. In order to avoid this problem while addressing the important and traceable femininity in Moreno, this chapter will focus on the notion of desire, not femininity, as it appears both as a textual and linguistic phenomenon and a thematic cornerstone of the novel.
This interest in desire requires at least a brief understanding of the concept and the ways in which it can be traced in the novel. The issue here is that desire has been studied from at least two distinct perspectives: first, a philosophical or theoretical one, based on the works of philosophers, novelists, and critical theorists. On the other hand, desire has been studied in neurological and sociological terms. These two approaches often prove surprisingly disparate and even contradictory. However, for the current reading of Moreno’s truth-seeking protagonist, both methods can prove useful. Therefore, the following section will detail theories of desire that stem from a variety of fields before attempting an explanation of how this desire appears in Moreno in terms of style and the search for truth.

The nature of Desire

There are, broadly speaking, two ways of approaching and understanding the nature of desire. On one hand, there are theories of desire that attempt to explain it as a social and neurological phenomenon. These more scientific approaches are put forth by psychologists, neuroscientists, and sociologists. On the other hand, there are theories of desire more interested in its philosophical and theoretical aspects. These are espoused by psychoanalysts, philosophers, and writers. While these two ways of studying, and defining desire may contradict one another, aspects of both will prove useful here, as they can shed light unto the way in which desire appears and is presented in the work of Marvel Moreno. Understanding the nature of desire will help in understanding why it plays such a pivotal role in *En diciembre* and how it determines the type of truth seeker Lina is when compared to Marcel or Alison.

4 The theories of desire described here are taken in part from the work of Tim Schroeder. (Schroeder)
Behavioral sciences and philosophy

Michael Smith has described one of the most basic theories of desire, known as action-based desire. Here, desire for something is understood as the underlying cause of an action. So, for example, for an organism to desire something is for the organism to be disposed to take whatever actions it believes are necessary to bring that something about (Smith 40). These theories fail to take into account the fact that desire and action are often at odds with one another. For example, Beatriz, Lina’s subject in the third part of the novel, is terrified of her own sexuality. And though she may desire to fall in love with a young man she met in boarding school, or find sexual satisfaction with her future husband, Javier, she may not be disposed to take action to do either. Action-based desire in the novel thus mostly appears in connection to socio-economic aspirations of the male characters. All three husbands, the other protagonists of each of the three parts of the novel, are obsessed with improving their social, economic and racial standing among the city’s higher classes: Benito will do it through medicine, Álvaro through psychiatry, and Javier through business and trade. As Lina encounters and attempts to understand each of them, she will focus on the way they behave and, by looking at their actions, attempt to determine their desire. This is evident, for example, in Benito Suárez, whose desire for a wife has more to do with social standing than love or sexual necessity. “A lo que sí aspiraba era a encontrar una virgen, una mujer que le hubiera sido fiel incluso antes de haber nacido para nunca ver su nombre arrastrado al fango, murmurado burlonamente, motivo de escarnio en la ciudad” (Moreno 76). Lina as a narrator comes to this conclusion after observing Benito’s jealous and violent outbursts, his reading of Nietzsche, and his mother’s fascist philosophy, all of which exalt the importance of action and will as a way of interacting with the world. Although there is something to be said of action-based
desire as a way of comprehending Lina’s search for truth: if she desires to understand the people around her, she does indeed appear to be disposed to do what she believes is necessary to achieve that, namely, observing their behavior and ultimately writing a novel⁵, action-based theories of desire cannot fully explain the complexities of desire in the novel or Lina’s own desire.

On the other hand, pleasure-based theories of desire posit that enjoyment, or the possibility of enjoyment, is the only factor that determines desire. This way of looking at desire, particularly as explained by Carolyn Morillo, allows for a distinction between desire and action (Morillo 169). Based on neurological observations, Morillo argues that episodes of pleasure are neurological events which are the causal origin of action. This suggests that “episodes of pleasure play the role of desires, and so desires are episodes of pleasure” (Schroeder). In Moreno, this type of desire appears most commonly when it is associated with sexual urges. Pleasure-based theories help the narrator explain certain characters in the novel, but not all of them. Sexually liberated characters such Catalina, Lina’s subject in the second part of the novel, or her fiercely independent mother, Divina Arriaga see sex and other worldly desires as pleasures unto themselves, regardless of consequence or social impact. In her description of Divina, the narrator describes her in terms of her relation to desire as a form of pleasure-seeking:

Divina Arriaga tomaba: un objeto, un caballo, un hombre, no a fin de poseerlo, pues parecía estar más allá de toda posesión, sino de integrarlo a su vida un instante, el tiempo de posar sobre él su mirada, o cabalgar a través de un bosque o hacer el amor entre sábanas de satín plateado que con sus galgos y sus sirvientes la acompañaban en sus viajes. (Moreno 159)

⁵ See also the passage quoted above: “antes del Verbo había habido la acción y antes de la acción el deseo…” (Moreno 65)
Unlike most other characters, she is uninterested in possession, a particular kind of desire that will become important further on. Divina’s desire is concerned exclusively with a momentary experience of pleasure. For the narrator, this seems to be a more honest or pure expression of desire. However, a pleasure-based theory of desire is not altogether appropriate for explaining Lina’s desire for truth. In fact, like in Proust, pleasure in truth-seeking is often non-existent. For Lina, like for Marcel, the search for a thorough and complete understanding is a painful experience, made up of a series of disappointments. Pleasure-based theories of desire also fail to take into account the contradictory relation between pleasure and desire in a doggedly conservative society. Álvaro Espinosa, Catalina’s husband, is a closeted homosexual who commits suicide because the desire for a socially condemned pleasure is in itself painful: “Y porque un tal placer lo condenaba a buscarlo el resto de su vida, Álvaro Espinosa se suicidó aquel domingo...” (Moreno 280).

Finally, an understanding of desire based on the work of Gertrude Anscombe may also prove useful. In her work, she describes a difference between desires and beliefs that can be expressed in grammatical terms. For Anscombe, beliefs act like declarative statements, which are fulfilled if and when the world conforms to them. Desires, on the other hand, behave like imperative sentences, satisfied by bringing the world to conform with them (Anscombe 71). While there is little consensus on what the actual implications of this theory might be, this way of describing desire and belief can be valuable here. In Moreno, for instance, there are two major belief structures that have been created (by men) to control and stifle desire: the Bible and psychoanalysis. These two systems, apparently contradictory but in the end equal, appear in the form of declarative statements, always in opposition to desires. In fact, this antagonism between desire and belief is observed by several female characters, especially when they find themselves sexually oppressed.
Catalina, whose husband is a psychiatrist who, despite his atheism insists on driving her to church every day, realizes that she feels:

extraviada a propósito entre dos discursos antagónicos que perseguían, sin embargo, un objetivo idéntico, desposeerla de algo, aun si no llegaba a precisar adónde ese algo se situaba y si, en plena confusión, no sólo empezaba a poner en duda todo cuanto los manuales eróticos de Divina Arriaga le habían enseñado sino a decirse que […] el acto sexual se limitara a contemplar el rostro sufriente de una Virgen (Moreno 227)

Beliefs, both religious and scientific, are described as antithetical to sexual desire. In this way, this understanding of belief as declarative sentences can serve to identify a very specific interaction between desire and the forces that try to control it. However, the text does not allow for a clear description of desires of any type as imperative sentences. They appear in myriad ways, not exclusively in imperative sentences. Therefore, this theory of desire is also incomplete when it comes to fully understanding desire in Moreno.

Critical theory and psychoanalysis

On the other hand, critical theory and psychoanalysis also attempt to describe and codify desire in ways that can prove at least partially applicable to Moreno’s novel. Even though her work is in contact with Freudian psychoanalysis, a theoretical system both Moreno and her characters see as eloquent but dangerous, this is not the only theoretical underpinning at work in the novel’s portrayal of desire. In fact, as it will become apparent in this section, Freudian (and Lacanian) theories of desire are embodied by the novel’s antagonists, while other, antithetical views are closer to Lina’s own desire as she searches for a complete understanding of people around her.
For Freud, and later for Lacan, desire is, in very broad terms, the result of lack. This way of seeing desire creates a two-part system in which there is, on one hand, a desiring subject and, on the other, an object of desire (which Lacan would call *objet petit a*). The subject desires something (or someone) because he does not possess it, and his desire can only be fulfilled when that object is acquired. As it is understood by Lacan, however, this object of desire is always unattainable and is thus the source of feelings of discomfort, grief, and guilt, all of which, at least in *En diciembre* lead to some form of violence, often directed at the object of desire, often self-inflicted by the desiring subject. This lack-based theory of desire also requires it to be understood in terms of possession, of having or not having, of wanting and purchasing: an almost capitalist way of thinking. This is precisely the type of desire the novel condemns. In Moreno’s world, there is an unhealthy kind of desire, made unhealthy by religion and psychoanalysis as they attempt to control it, and it almost always appears in terms of possession.

This possession-based theory of desire is also similar to Jean-Paul Sartre’s view of it. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre describes desire as *trouble*. Krystin Gorton explains that “Sartre’s understanding of desire draws attention to the way desire positions, anchors or fixes the individual in the world and in its relation to an Other. He also points to the impossibility of desire in its desire to possess the Other: ‘Such is the impossible ideal of desire: to possess the Other’s transcendence as pure transcendence and at the same time as body’” (Gorton 10).

In the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, however, desire is redefined in terms that better suit the way in which Lina’s search for truth operates in *En diciembre*. In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari question the lack-based theory of desire. “To a certain degree, the traditional
logic of desire is all wrong from the very outset […] From the moment that we place desire on the side of acquisition, we make desire an idealistic (dialectical, nihilistic) conception, which causes us to look upon it as primarily a lack: a lack of an object, a lack of the real object” (Deleuze and Guattari 25). What they suggest instead is to consider desire in positive rather than negative terms. By proposing that desire is better understood as a problem of production, not of fantasies (as psychoanalysis claims) but in the real and social realms, they create an avenue to better understand desire in Moreno. For Deleuze and Guattari, lack is not something that occurs in the subject, but rather something that takes place in a “detrimentalized space” (Deleuze and Guattari 35) and therefore subject to a guilt-free experience that is conducive to production, or, in the terms of Proustian truth seekers, (artistic, or literary) creation.

In fact, the Deleuzian production-based theory of desire has been adopted by feminist theorists as it removes women from the role of the repositories of lack and the man’s “other” and allows for a refiguring of desire in more positive terms. Quoting Elizabeth Grosz, Gorton claims that “As production, desire does not provide blueprints, models, ideals, or goals. Rather, it experiments, it makes: it is fundamentally aleatory, inventive” (Gorton 25).

In Moreno, desire continues to be a complex, often contradictory phenomenon. However, one thing is certain: in En diciembre, any sort of desire that is experienced, described or acted upon in terms of lack or possession is a perverse, often prudish and violent, version of it. The worst antagonists in the novel are the men and women who would desire in order to possess; they stifle creativity and always turn desire into violence. Eulalia, Dora’s mother, for example, upon seeing her powerful (and therefore dangerous) sexuality grow, tries to control it by possessing her and, in doing so, determines the way Dora will be treated as an object of desire by all other characters:
Al principio intentó sofocar, contener o destruir aquella cosa inaudita que Dora rezumaba por cada poro de su piel; al no lograrlo, pues a pesar de fajas y vendajes los senos de su hija se erguían y sus caderas se redondeaban y la cabellera que le crecía a borbotones rompía las cintas de trenzas y colas de caballos, trató fascinada de hacerla suya: como una enredadera se le trepó al cuerpo y quiso respirar por sus pulmones, mirar a través de sus ojos, latir al ritmo de su corazón: escudriñó su cerebro con la misma enervada obstinación con al que registraba las gavetas de su tocador y leía las páginas de sus libros y cuadernos: la obligó a pensar en voz alta, a contarle sus secretos, a revelarle sus deseos: terminó por poseerla antes que ningún hombre, abriéndole a todo hombre el camino de su posesión (Moreno 30, my emphasis).

In fact, this fascination with a sexuality that must be owned in order to be controlled, both physically and emotionally, is what all three male protagonists attempt. Benito, Álvaro, and Javier, each in his own way, see little difference between wanting something or someone and owning them. Lina’s desire, on the other hand, has nothing to do with possession, which here could be considered a male, or rather patriarchal, way of desiring. In fact, this is perhaps the clearest distinction between Lina and Marcel. While Lina merely uses desire to create and understand, as will be explained further on, Marcel uses it to seize, fix, own or possess. His infatuations with Gilberte, Odette, Mme. de Guermantes, and, particularly, Albertine are painful (and therefore push him towards truth-seeking) precisely because he cannot contain them. It would be problematic, however, to suggest simply that Proust’s configuration of desire is patriarchal while Moreno’s is not simply because one centers around possession and the other one does not. What this understanding does allow, however, is for the fact that Moreno is a woman, so important to
previous critical study of her work, to be folded into this reading of her protagonist as a proustian truth seeker. Also, as it will become apparent in the following chapters, not all women desire in the same way.

This study of the nature of desire, however, has not yet clarified exactly how it determines Lina’s search for truth, her relationship with signs or the way in which desire is inexorably connected with style. The following section will attempt to show how Lina’s Deleuzian understanding of desire comes about, how it relates to her search and her apprenticeship and what it means in the context of a city in which desire-as-lack-and-possession are the “normal” ways of wanting.

Truth-seeking is Desire

As a novel of apprenticeship, *En diciembre llegaban las brisas* does not start with a completely developed understanding of desire, especially from Lina’s perspective. Instead, Lina herself must come to terms with the fact that the way in which characters around her, particularly male characters’ experience desire is a different, and perhaps perverse, version of the kind of longing she begins to feel. Since the very specific, Deleuzian, type of desire is closely connected to Proustian truth-seeking, Lina must first discover and understand how she desires before she can become an accomplished decoder of signs.

However, before Lina can understand her own desire, she is confronted with a different sort. This different, perverse desire is presented to her early on in the novel in the form of a sign that she must decode. When Benito first appears, in the first part of the novel, his desire for Dora is evidently violent and dangerous; when the reader first meets him, he is in a rage, chasing a bloodied
Dora into Lina’s house. Later, when Benito comes to her house to confront her father over Lina’s attempts to help Dora, he is faced with a man whom he cannot bully. Lina’s father’s calm demeanor stands in stark contrast to Benito’s rage, but the narrator’s eye falls squarely on the raging husband who cannot seem to express his frustration. Lina is initially disconcerted by this display, and, for the first time in *En diciembre*, the protagonist becomes intensely aware of her desire to understand others: “Y entonces sintió dentro de sí el desconcierto de Benito Suárez, su furiosa impotencia” (Moreno 127). In a strange moment of empathy, Lina identifies not with Dora, the victim, but with Benito, the victimizer. Momentarily, she feels his furious impotence in a way that contradicts previous criticism of Moreno’s work. Most critics focus on the times in which Lina creates her own consciousness by contrasting it with those of her friends, her grandmother or her aunts. This passage, however, shows Lina identifying with a male character, a male character that represents the most perverse type of desire Lina encounters: desire as possession. Her comprehension of Benito is, as it was perhaps to be expected, incomplete and only momentary. However, she still tries to understand what happened:

Pues no habría podido hablar de percepción, ni siquiera tuvo la necesidad de mirarlo. Por un instante, breve como la sombra de una nube al mediodía, le pareció hallarse en él, en esa conciencia ultrajada que había venido buscando una especie de reparación, en la seguridad de poseer por primera vez la carta que iba a permitirle exigir respeto, la discusión o quizá disculpas, para encontrarse frente a un hombre sosegado que sin tomar en serio sus reproches se permitía tratarlo con condescendencia (Moreno 127).

Evidently, this moment of understanding has little to do with sight. While Marcel often remembers some form of visual artifact when he becomes aware of his truth-seeking in moments
of unmasking, whether in the form of a painting, an x-ray, a kaleidoscope or a moving picture, Lina quickly realizes her eyes have little to do with this. Instead, she must turn to a poetic language to describe (mostly to herself) her brief instant of identification. By using these images of clouds at noon to depict her experience in Benito, Lina begins to realize that conversational language is insufficient for her quest. The image also suggests, subtly at first, something that she will come to realize further on: complete understanding of a person is ultimately impossible. Instead, the best she can hope for is an instant of fading clarity. This does not mean, however, that she will lose faith in her search. Like Marcel, Lina is constantly faced with disappointment in the people she thinks she knows and her own ability to decode them. But like Marcel, she is never completely discouraged. From early on, both truth seekers are keenly aware of the impossibility of their search; both realize that there is in fact no truth hiding behind the veil, no ultimate secret waiting to be discovered. There are only more layers of signs. The moment in which she finds herself inside him gives her hope.

This passage is also significant because of its sentence structure. After the uncharacteristically short sentence that begins the experience of identification with Benito, the text returns to a longer, complex form made up of dependent clauses. The sentence begins centered in Lina’s awareness of her identification with Benito and its brevity. The following clauses describe Benito’s state of mind in terms that Lina, temporarily empathetic, can also feel. They also set up the tension between beginning and end that is typical of truth-seeking sentences. Benito’s rage and frustration are in marked opposition to Lina’s father’s condescending calmness, and the instant of insight Lina feels comes mostly from the contrast and tension between the two. This is an important realization, as it teaches Lina three things about the search for truth. First, it suggests the
impossibility of a complete and permanent knowledge. Lina’s grandmother has already warned her about this, but this is the first time Lina experiences a successful glimpse at a hidden truth and its unavoidable brevity. Second, the passage links truth-seeking with tension, specifically with tension in the sentence. This is not the first time in which the connection between style and truth seeking has been established, but is the first time an instant of clarity occurs in a sentence with a very poignant moment of tension. Finally, this passage provides Lina with a method for her quest. She achieved this brief moment of discovery by studying the particularities of Benito’s longing, a depraved kind of possession-based desire. This suggests that Lina’s quest for truth must begin with an understanding of the desires of others as well as her own. In fact, as Gómez de Gonzáles suggests,

Como en el pensamiento moderno, la autoconciencia femenina encuentra el ‘yo’ en el ‘otro’. La voz narrativa hetero-extradiegética no busca tanto la exploración de la subjetividad como el reconocimiento de la compleja red de relaciones que queda trabada en la salida del ‘yo’ fuera de sí mismo. Por eso, la conciencia femenina se construye desde el umbral, desde la frontera, en las situaciones límites del suicidio y la liberación. (Gómez de Gonzáles, “La Palabra Como Reescritura Del Destino” 142)

This idea of finding the self in the other is not new for proustian truth seekers. In fact, both Proust and Deleuze seem to be aware that the ultimate end of the apprenticeship of a man of letters is not only the creation of the work of art, but also knowledge of the self. Gómez de Gonzáles also notes that the narrator, whom she separates from Lina, is more interested in the complex web of relations between characters than in subjectivity, her characters’ or her own. The distinction is not
altogether clear, as it assumes that there can be such a thing as a subjectivity that can exist isolated from social encounters. The point, however, stands. The narrator does encounter the other in the moments in which she “exits herself”. This explains why instances of realization come about in moments of great conflict and, often, violence or melodrama. What Gómez de Gonzáles does not realize is that in *En diciembre*, the narrator cannot be completely severed from the protagonist so that, even if the narrator’s subjectivity may seem extradiegetic, it is in fact Lina, the truth seeker, who is telling the story of her own apprenticeship.

What is most interesting however, is that Lina, both as narrator and character, is aware of the possibility of truth-seeking long before she encounters it herself. Each of three parts of the novel have one or more female ancestors, women who guide Lina and serve as role models in her search for truth. Each woman responds to Lina’s narration of events, serving as a choir of sorts and providing a theoretical underpinning which Lina uses to make sense of her friends and their husbands. In the first section, Jimena, the grandmother, quotes from the Bible and teaches Lina from a rational, but fatalistic, point of view. The second section has two ancestors: aunt Eloisa often talks about rebellion and the pursuit of freedom that echoes second-wave feminism while Divina Arriaga, Catalina’s mother, is the epitome of a woman so completely liberated, sexually, financially, philosophically and even ethnically, that she can observe Barranquilla society from the outside. The third and final section has aunt Irene, who attempts some sort of harmony with the world through the creation of art, music in her case, and introspection. These four women are, each in their own way, a proustian truth seeker. They have finished their apprenticeship and are ready to guide Lina in her own. Divina Arriaga, for instance offers a particular type of teaching, as Lina never meets her in person and only hears about her from her aunt Eloisa. The daughter of
a wealthy landowner, Divina returns to Barranquilla after a long education under the tutelage of an anthropologist in Europe. Her cosmopolitan and liberated ways initially fascinate Barranquilla, and people in the city’s country club, the seat of aesthetic, intellectual and moral power in high society, begin to copy her. They will later turn on her as both men and women realize that an intelligent and sexually liberated woman who is willing to shine a light on the city’s contradictions is a powerful and dangerous force. But when she first arrives in Barranquilla, her wealth, beauty, and sophistication seem fascinating.

Her training allows Divina to see beyond the facade of civility that Barranquilla society likes to put forth. In this way, she decodes admiration in high society and discovers that underneath it, there is little more than petty squabbling for position, racism, and sexual frustration. Interestingly, the narrator here indirectly gives Divina a voice and uses her description of a swamp with its true, hidden nature bubbling up as a way to put truth seeking into slightly more mundane terms. The metaphor of a swamp with something hidden that bubbles up is useful for Divina’s type of truth seeking, as she is content to observe the sign and wait for whatever truth it hides to bubble up. Her sensibilities as the disciple of an anthropologist allows her to “observarlos como lo habría hecho
al encontrarse frente a una tribu de pigmeos africanos, analizando sus comportamientos sin intervenir en ellos y guardando las conclusiones para ella misma” (Moreno 172). In her independent and somewhat debauched life, Divina cares little about what Barranquilla society may be hiding. She is curious, yes, but she is content to observe without participation. This type of relationship with the sign is impossible for Lina: she cannot stand outside of her own society. She can, however, use Divina as a role model, something that she will do with her three other ancestors.

Her grandmother and her aunts give Lina tools she can use in her apprenticeship, but they cannot be completely emulated. They are all truth seekers, but live somehow apart from the society they have observed and now attempt to explain. All four ancestors have suffered (or are suffering during the events of the novel) at the hands of patriarchal society in Barranquilla, but none of them appear to have been silenced by it. Jimena, for instance, is fiercely critical of her society and of Benito Suárez in particular, but she is the only person he truly respects. Even after his fall from grace at the end of the first part, he continues to write to her, asking for advice and forgiveness. Irene, on the other hand, can retreat from society in her home, the Torre del italiano, an almost surreal space with walls covered in hieroglyphs and symbols, a very physical representation of the world of signs. Here, Irene can dedicate herself to her music, while the grandmother, Jimena, inhabits a world outside of time, devoid of causality or destiny, made up of pure memory. This

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6 “Ya entonces para doña Eulalia el tiempo transcurría de otra manera, no corría ni pasaba, ni era el fondo sobre el cual los seres y las cosas parecían cambiar; en su memoria cada episodio de su vida se había fijado para siempre, ajeno a cualquier cronología o relación alguna de causalidad, pero cristalizando la injusticia de haber ocurrido, y por lo tanto, de haberse podido transformar en recuerdo” (Moreno 50). This is a way of perceiving time and memory that may offer some insight, but will ultimately prove useless for Lina’s search. If her grandmother lives outside of time, Lina lives hopelessly invested in it. The fact that she only appears in the text as a first-person narrator in the epilogue, when years have passed and she is living in Paris suggests that Lina needed time to pass before she could finish her work, the creative result of her search. Perhaps years after that,
suggests that Lina, who is subject to the practicalities of life as an active member of country-club society, cannot hope to be a truth seeker in the same way her ancestors are. They exist in a mythical space that is wholly unavailable to Lina and her friends.

Even though Lina’s ancestors cannot be imitated and Lina cannot hope to achieve the level of understanding of the truth they appear to possess, they can indeed point her in the right direction. Whether by recommending books (which range from the Bible and the Kama Sutra to Freud and Nietzsche) or by simply pointing out facts and observations about society in general, Lina’s ancestors provide her with a series of theoretical tools with which she can undergo her own education. This tends to happen at the beginning of each chapter, which Freddy Téllez calls the incipit, a section which serves as an introduction of sorts, a repository for the theory and critical thought that guides and colors the events: “Los incipit en En diciembre.. pueden ser leídos como una condensación extrema, como un núcleo, como un alambique, como el crisol mágico de todo lo que sigue después” (Téllez 157). This extreme condensation at the start of every chapter is later peppered with asides in which Lina, as narrator, gives voice to each ancestor. They hear Lina’s versions of the narrated events and offer comments that often serve as a guidepost for her search.

The presence of these mentors makes Lina a particular case of proustian truth seeker. Even though she is very similar to Marcel, Proust’s protagonist is the sole truth seeker in the Recherche. There is no other character that can serve as a mentor of sorts in his search. The artists he meets and admires, Elstir, Vinteuil, or Bergotte, or the clever, insightful men of society, Swann or

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when the novel she has written is long forgotten, she could hope to live untouched as by time as her grandmother, but during the events of the novel, Lina is keenly aware of time and its effects on her search.
Charlus, are all subject to painful unmaskings and in the end offer Marcel little certainty or advice. Even his mother or his grandmother present him with signs that need decoding. Moreno, on the other hand, provides Lina with several mentors. They too are ultimately unknowable, like all other characters, but Lina at least is not the only truth seeker in the novel. This difference between Lina and Marcel sheds some light on the nature of the desire that drives each of them. While Marcel is obsessive and suspicious, consumed by jealousy and thus separated from the people around him, Lina can be part of a small group of like-minded truth seekers, even if she cannot achieve their level of success. This is in part due to the fact that Lina cares little about possessing her subjects, while possession-based desire is the only form of desire in the Recherche.

In the second part, when discussing the way in which Catalina, Divina’s daughter and the only protagonist to become truly liberated, is faced with a psychiatrist husband who wants to control her sexuality, aunt Eloisa comments on the connection between possession-based desire, the use of language, and patriarchal domination in which psychiatry plays. Like the other ancestors, she provides Lina the necessary concepts, the keywords, she will need. Here: liberation, apprenticeship, the word, rebellion.

Los hombres habían inventado una organización aberrante cuyo principio y finalidad eran la dominación de la mujer: que esta fuese cómplice inocente o culpable de su condición de víctima la lavaba de cualquier responsabilidad porque si su inteligencia no sucumbía a los prejuicios y su coraje resistía las presiones del medio toda su energía iría a consumirse en liberarse a sí misma a través de un aprendizaje lento, difícil, surcando penas, empobrecido por la soledad, que culminaba imponiéndole al mundo su dignidad de persona y comenzaba robándole al hombre la palabra, la que él había utilizado diestramente para someterla a su
capricho, creando así el primer modelo a partir del cual se había pensado y realizado esa relación atroz en el que cada hombre se convertía en lobo de los hombres. Al principio había sido el Verbo, decía la Biblia, y en eso al menos, la Biblia decía la verdad. (Moreno 206, my emphasis)

The aberrant system she refers to here is the combination of religion and psychoanalysis. According to aunt Eloisa, whose words the narrator is echoing here, they both use the same tool and have the same purpose. Speaking specifically of psychoanalysis in this passage, the narrator addresses an issue that has come up several times in the novel: the culpability of women in their own domination. Lina has wondered about this before, when describing the roles her protagonists or their mothers have played in perpetuating patriarchal violence. However, she seems unable to understand the phenomenon until aunt Eloisa’s voice provides insight. She describes the things a woman needs to overcome her domination: courage and intelligence. These two qualities become essential to Lina’s search for truth. In fact, this passage finally articulates the way in which her search for truth has been taking place all along. For the first time in En diciembre, the word “apprenticeship” is used to describe the path women must follow. Interestingly, this process is described as painful, difficult, and slow, words that coincide with the way Deleuze describes Marcel’s process. As it became evident in the previous chapter, Marcel’s education in the world of signs is structured around moments of painful realization, a structure which is not completely repeated in Lina’s own learning process.

Further, aunt Eloisa declares that this apprenticeship begins with command of la palabra. Language is the essential tool of the search. This is perhaps an obvious observation at this juncture, but Eloisa still chooses to make a point of it. She is aware, like Deleuze, that if signs are to be
deciphered, the only way of doing so is through the creative use of language. Her comment on the use of “the word” is also interesting, as she insists that language, which here can be understood as Deleuzian signs, has been used as a weapon against women. This is in keeping with aunt Eloisa’s overall attitude towards the search for truth. She believes in an upheaval of societal norms (the word rebellion appears often in her interventions) and equates the search for liberation with the search for truth. This is not necessarily the same attitude Lina will ultimately take, but she is undoubtedly influenced by it. Like her truth-seeking peers and their narratives, Lina participates in the topos of the Kunstlerroman; her command of the “word” comes to a productive conclusion when she becomes a novelist.

Additionally, like Deleuze, aunt Eloisa also points out that decoding is necessarily a violent process, requiring women to steal language away from men. This violence is necessary because the sign does not give up its truth easily or without a fight. The way in which language is the tool that must be stolen back before it can be used to decipher also provides insight into the types of desire Lina encounters throughout her search. Catalina, for example, feels disgust for her husband, even before he proves himself to be an abusive partner. She finds him physically repulsive, but it is an “aversión que por su violencia misma anunciaba ya una oscura atracción que Lina no podía imaginar” (Moreno 200). Once again, it is the violence in the tension between Catalina’s repulsion and her attraction that piques Lina’s curiosity. Catalina’s love of Álvaro Espinosa is a sign born out of violence that requires violence to be deciphered. The fact that Lina couldn’t imagine it means little here, as she will spend the remainder of the chapter doing exactly that. She will dig into Catalina’s sexuality by exploring her affair with an indigenous man who represents guiltless desire. She will also explore Álvaro’s hidden homosexuality, which stands in stark contrast as it is
defined by fear, guilt and self-loathing. Her treatment of both Álvaro and Catalina is ruthless because by this point she is beginning to understand that violence is always, in one form or another, connected to desire. This is evident in the sentence, which begins with a sense of dread or unease and ends with the discovery of curiosity. This means that curiosity is the textual embodiment of Lina’s desire.

However, Moreno’s clearest depiction of Lina’s search for truth comes in the third part of the novel, related to her aunt Irene, the only other artist in the family. In this section, Lina is fascinated by her friend Beatriz, who, out of all the novel’s protagonists, has the most problematic relation with desire. Since she was a girl Beatriz has taken to heart all the contradictions that Moreno points out in Barranquilla’s treatment of female sexuality. She feels sexual desire, to be sure, but she finds no pleasure in it: the orgasm, she tells Lina later in life, after her marriage,

no compensaba las humillaciones a las cuales debía someterse para obtenerlo: era demasiado breve, venía precedido de angustia y la abandonaba en plena culpabilidad […] Beatriz vivía su sexualidad como los hombres, entre el miedo del instinto cuya aparición les recordaba la parte aborrecida de su esencia, y el odio irracional frente a las simples verdades de la carne.

(Moreno 422)

These lines present the clearest indictment of masculine desire in the novel. Men (and women absorbed into being willing participants in a patriarchal system), the narrator suggests, experience it for all the wrong reasons and derive from it all the wrong things. What makes Beatriz a particularly interesting case for Lina is that she sincerely believes her own sexuality to be dangerous and humiliating. She experiences it, in Moreno’s words, like a man: plagued by anxiety,
rewarded only with guilt after an all-too brief instant of pleasure and completely without curiosity. This is what separates Beatriz from the other two protagonists and what ultimately separates Lina’s way of experiencing desire. While Beatriz (and patriarchal society in general) feels no curiosity when she encounters desire, Lina is driven by it. Curiosity for Lina, like for Marcel, is the driving force and the result of their thirst for truth. Interestingly, this passage also contains one the few appearances of the word *verdad* that is completely devoid of irony. Almost every other time the word comes up in *En diciembre*, it is described with suspicion. Here, however, the simple truths of the flesh are placed in direct opposition to man’s irrational fear and hatred of sexuality. This suggests that truth, whatever it may be, can be found, or at least looked for, by exploring desire without guilt.

It is no surprise then that the moment in which Lina most articulately expresses the particularities of her search for truth comes about when discussing Beatriz and her perplexing understanding of sexual desire. In a passage in which Lina is describing the way Beatriz tortures her dolls for sins that she “could not possibly mention”, aunt Irene interjects. The sentence flows out of Lina’s voice and into Irene’s. She interrupts the narration to comment on Beatriz’s inability to articulate the sins she is atoning for in her dolls:

‘Que no sabe mencionar’, le oiría una vez Lina sugerir a tía Irene sin alzar los ojos del inmenso *Libro de los Muertos* cuyos jeroglíficos le había estado mostrando a fin de enseñarle el modo de descifrarlos; no en un tono afirmativo, sino de interrogación, como si creyera a Lina capaz de *ir más allá de las apariencias buscando la significación exacta detrás de la
oscuridad del signo, a la manera en que aprendía a encontrar sentido de las complejas figuras del libro abierto sobre la mesa. (Moreno 296, my emphasis)

Aunt Irene mockingly suggests that Beatriz’s problem is not her prudishness, but rather her ignorance. If she could name those sins, Irene appears to suggest, if she had access to the words that could help her understand her perceived sins, she might feel less tormented by them. The passage, however, abandons Beatriz in favor of a description of Irene’s book. The fact that it is a book made up of hieroglyphs is significant for several reasons. While previous sections mention the Bible and psychoanalysis, and both Jimena and Eloisa find them suspicious because they purport to offer access to the truth, the third and final section of the novel mentions the Book of the Dead as a worthwhile tool for Lina’s education precisely because it hides it behind the sign. Irene is the ancestor who most obviously and directly engages Lina in her apprenticeship in the world of signs. This is perhaps the most important passage in the novel’s explanation of Lina’s search for truth. It shows that Lina is capable of going beyond the obvious and that her apprenticeship in life is the apprenticeship of signs, almost in the same words Deleuze uses to describe Marcel’s education. This mention of hieroglyphs clearly connects Lina with Marcel, or at the very least with Deleuze’s reading of the Recherche. Both protagonists find themselves learning to interpret a complex system of signs. The way the passage is written is also an example of the way in which sentence structure echoes the nature of the search. Aunt Irene’s interjection is quickly followed by an interesting use of the conditional. It is not the first time it appears in En diciembre In fact, it is the narrator’s way of connecting three disparate times: the diegetic moment of Lina’s relationship with Beatriz, her later conversation with her aunt and the extradiegetic remembrance of the conversation. This temporal flow within the same sentence connects Lina the character with her narrator persona, who is writing in Paris many years later. In this way, the novel
Parga Linares

resembles Proust’s *Recherche* as the older narrator, who has become a novelist as a result of her search, reminisces about her path. The sentence also displays the typical structure of proustian truth seeking in style: it begin with an apparent certainty, Beatriz’s ignorance, and after a series of dependent clauses, ends with an almost entirely opposite revelation, Lina’s ability to decipher the sign through her own curiosity.

The following sentences reveal more of Lina’s sudden realization about the nature of her education. As the passage continues, Lina has another momentary revelation, like the one she had at the beginning of the novel with Benito Suárez. This revelation is in any ways similar to Marcel’s so called *moments bienheureux*: they appear suddenly, when the narrator is confronted with a sign he or she can momentarily crack open. These brief instants provide the proustian truth seeker a glimpse of the possibility of a true discovery, but they also hint at the inevitability of the search’s failure. In this instance, Lina’s revelation comes as she is confronted with Beatriz’s inexplicable behavior:

> Y de repente Lina tuvo la impresión de mirar las cosas desde otro ángulo, de haber sido proyectada a una dimensión tan reveladora que siempre se recordaría enmudecida de asombro junto a tía Irene, asociando a toda rapidez la cantidad de detalles desvanecidos en su inconsciente y recuperados en un instante por su memoria: los juegos de Beatriz no se le antojaron ya una imitación mecánica del ejemplo que su madre le ofrecía, sino la expresión de un desequilibrio más profundo, como si al torturar a sus muñecas otra persona se apoderara de ella. (Moreno 296)
The passage describes the precise process of deciphering a sign. It is a violent experience in which the seeker is temporarily blinded by the sudden revelation that allows her to perceive the sign from a different angle. The process of association leads Lina to realize the importance of memory and its ability to bring together disparate versions of the same character in the mind of an ailing, aging writer. Lina’s discovery about Beatriz’s behavior comes in the form of a correction: the moment of insight shows her that her previous understanding of Beatriz was mistaken in the same way Marcel’s understanding of a character’s mask is shattered. Lina’s reaction to the experience will be different to Marcel’s. While he is troubled by disappointment and anxiety, Lina merely feels more desire. She attempts to understand the phenomenon, especially how it relates to desire:

Desde entonces, Lina vería su desazón transformarse en curiosidad. De ese modo, Beatriz se convertiría muy pronto para Lina en fuente de observación, no obstante el rechazo instintivo que su presencia siempre le produjo. (Moreno 296)

Lina understands that her curiosity is the result of a very specific form of violence. It is not necessarily related to physical violence, like Benito’s or Beatriz’s. Instead, her desire to understand is the result of a feeling of unease she feels when confronted with a sign she cannot decipher. This passage, however, contains an important revelation about the search. From this moment on, Lina knows that curiosity, which is to say, her desire is born from unease, which, in turn, comes about after she encounters a sign.

Proustian Truth Seekers and Style
Lina’s reaction to the sign and the way the sentence structure reflects this reaction is what connects Moreno’s novel with Proust’s. In the similarities between the two, both in terms of form and content, one can find Lina’s conversion from young, curious girl, ill at ease with her environment into an accomplished novelist, a path that echoes Marcel’s education. There are, however, differences in the way each protagonist carries out their search for truth.

What Lina wants is not a privileged look into her friend’s subjectivity. She is not interested in Dora, Catalina, or Beatriz’s dreams, fears or aspirations. Unlike Marcel, Lina is not concerned with uncovering the true nature of the people around her in order to possess them. She cares little about control and is well aware that ultimately, they, like every other character in the novel and the world itself, are inscrutable. She also suspects, following her ancestor’s advice, that any doctrine that purports to offer access to the truth is dangerous. The difference then, between Lina and Marcel, lies in the quality of their desire. Because in Proust desire is almost always expressed in terms of possession, jealousy and envy play key roles throughout Marcel’s apprenticeship. This experience of desire comes to its conclusion in the fifth volume of the *Recherche*. Here, Marcel’s obsession with understanding precisely who Albertine and Andrée are leads him to separate love and sexual desire from the desire for truth and knowledge. He would prefer to stop loving girls if only to better understand them.

Et, en elles-mêmes, qu’étaient Albertine et Andrée ? Pour le savoir, il faudrait vous immobiliser, ne plus vivre dans cette attente perpétuelle de vous où vous passez toujours autres ; il faudrait ne plus vous aimer, pour vous fixer, ne plus connaître votre interminable et toujours déconcertante arrivée, ô jeunes filles, ô rayon successif dans le tourbillon où nous
palpitons de vous voir reparaître en ne vous reconnaissant qu’à peine, dans la vitesse vertigineuse de la lumière. (Proust 1178)

The initial question appears to be relatively straightforward. However, it betrays the type of curiosity Marcel feels. He does not want to know who Albertine and Andrée are, or how they present themselves to others or how they interact with society: he wants to know who they are in themselves. The question leads the Marcel-narrator into an extremely long sentence in which he appears to lose control of himself, gliding from one musing to another, adding invocations and metaphors all the while describing both the need to hold the objects of his desire in place long enough to understand them and, at the same time, the inevitable disappointment of such possession. They, the girls he desires and tries to understand, are always disconcerting; one can never truly possess them any more than one can grab hold a ray of light in one’s hand. Marcel’s desire though, even if he suspects it is impossible to fulfill, is always to possess. This explains why disappointment is the key to his process of discovery.

Lina, on the other hand, is less interested in possession, even if she too is doomed to be disappointed by her search. Even if truth and complete knowledge are impossible, something that Lina suspects very early on in the novel, the act of searching for them provides some hope. In fact, Lina realizes that the way to reconcile the inevitable disappointment of truth-seeking with her production-based desire is the act of writing. This means that style, a very particular sort of sentence structure, provides a semblance of hope for Lina, as it does for all truth seekers. As Téllez, suggests, this is where the narrator’s privileged position can be found, “en la reconciliación de sí misma en la escritura” (Téllez 166).
The type of sentence that Moreno crafts when Lina encounters a sign that makes her feel her curiosity with more intensity has been described in terms that strongly resemble Marcel’s own aspirations with regards to other people. This suggests that, even though Lina and Marcel may differ in the type and quality of their desires, they can be extremely similar in their style. This is not surprising. As it has been above, style, and specifically the sentence structure, is the textual embodiment of the search for truth. By making sentences in which the period, the sign that denote the completion of the thought, is pushed further and further back by subordinate clauses, asides and temporal digressions, a proustian narrator tries to encircle the object in an attempt to seize it, to hold it still while they study it. Describing Moreno’s style, Rodríguez Amaya posits that the language in *En diciembre* is wholly new and original precisely because it does not directly attack its object of inquiry, but instead surrounds it.

What Rodríguez Amaya fails to realize, however, is that this passage can also describe the typical proustian sentence. Both Proust and Moreno use the long, serpentine sentence in similar ways. This means that Moreno’s language is not particularly new, it simply has its roots, as he correctly points out, in Europe. This in no way diminishes Moreno’s achievement. In fact, as
Rodríguez Amaya suggests, what Moreno is doing is renewing the proustian sentence in a wholly original setting with a different set of signs. The underlying problem for both narrators is, however, the same: desire for truth. Rodríguez Amaya’s reading of the style has one further problem: he does not consider Lina’s desire and its connection to style. It is true that, like Marcel, she attempts to fix her subject in language, but unlike him she is not interested in ownership or possession. Lina’s style, is satisfied with observation in a way that Marcel’s cannot be because she accepts the impossibility of true knowledge more freely than Proust’s protagonist.

Despite their differences, however, both Marcel and Lina are aware of the connection between memory and style. Shortly after she meets Benito for the first time, at the start of the novel, Lina, the aging narrator who is looking back on the scene, comments on her initial confusion and curiosity. Although she did not know it in the moment, her first encounter with a violent sign changed her. Years later, she would understand the significance of the event. It will take her years to discover that it is here, in this passage, that she begins the search for truth that presumably consumes her entire life. Only as an older woman, writing the novel of her search, will she realize that she is a truth seeker and that her way, perhaps the only way, to carry out the search is in writing.

A Lina le llevó mucho tiempo comprender el alcance de lo ocurrido, en fin, no supo que el simple hecho de haber sido testigo de aquella escena la había cambiado, o más precisamente, había puesto en marcha el mecanismo que de manera irrevocable iba a cambiarla. Fue algo que intuyó después, con los años, al advertir que su memoria conservaba hasta el último detalle de aquel sábado de carnaval en que vio por primera vez a Benito Suárez. (Moreno 22)
She discovers that it is memory which allows her to encircle and study her subjects from her room in Paris years later. Desire, such as it is, inhabits memory, specifically the memory of an aging, ailing writer who uses the process of remembrance in writing to carry out his search. This is true of both Lina and Marcel. While Lina has suspected the link between memory, style and truth-seeking since the very first pages of the first part of *En diciembre*, she comes to it again with much more clarity in the epilogue. Written in the first person, instead of the third, this epilogue cements Lina as witness of her past and a chronicler of Barranquilla society, but also as a student of destiny.

A veces, cuando en las noches la fiebre vuelve a subirme, pienso que como las abuelas yo habito en medio de recuerdos. Todos estos años vividos en París o han logrado borrarlos; al contrario, las fiebres y hasta el frío que saca sus navajas a la salida del Metro cuando regreso del hospital parecen devolverme con obstinación a la ciudad del Prado, a las brisas que siempre llegaban en diciembre, a las tardes que sentadas en una mesa del ‘Country Club’, con el sol reverberando ahí afuera en los campos de golf, mis amigas y yo nos divertíamos adivinando nuestros posibles destinos con ayuda de un naipe. [...] Del mío y del de las otras [...] ningún naipe habría pronosticado entonces sus inauditos caprichos. (Moreno 442)

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7 Gómez de Gonzáles notices this connection between memory and style and suggests that the enjambment between each phrase and the next, is an essential part of the textual weave: “De allí el encabalgamiento, que parece no tener fin, de unas acciones en otras, entrelazadas a partir de la memoria que va urdiendo los hilos del discurso” (Gómez de Gonzáles, “‘En diciembre llegaban las brisas’ entre el melodrama y la carcajada” 8).
Her childhood desire to understand and predict her life and those of her friends is, unsurprisingly, impossible to fulfil. As an author, writing years later, she is painfully aware of her failure. But she still cannot keep herself from analyzing and studying the scene memory has brought her. This passage is written in the same serpentine style made to surround and hold on to the subject. The description of the bitter cold in Paris creates a tension with the warm breezes that came to her and her friends in their childhood that come later. This tension, as it was pointed out above, is a proustian device. Another tension by opposition is quickly suggested. The playful way in which a young Lina hopes to predict her friend’s destinies with a deck of cards (a system of signs she hopes can crack other signs) is quickly contrasted with her knowledge that no deck could possibly predict or control destiny. Writing, however, the production of art as a response to desire, offers the aging Lina some hope. The act of creation gives her a way of finding this out, of discovering the only truth she can come to, that there is no truth hiding behind the sign, simply more signs.

If the difference between Proust’s truth seeker and Moreno’s lies in the nature of their desire, this difference signifies the passage from an early twentieth century understanding of knowledge and truth to a late twentieth century approach to it. Even though Marcel suspected that truth was impossible, he still obsessed over it and tried, even at the end of the novel, to truly possess those around him. Lina, on the other hand, has a less negative, less violent type of desire. She is by no means immune to pain or disappointment, but she can more clearly articulate the fact that there is no singular truth. This is a realization that in fact structures the entire novel. Much like Marcel’s search is given form by a succession of disappointments in his powers of observation and decoding of signs, Lina’s journey takes the shape of her failed attempts to apply theories of decoding unto
her subjects. Elston correctly points out that each section of the novel is written under the sign of a way of thinking, a philosophical apparatus that pretends to grant access to the truth. Each of these systems is provided by each of her ancestors:

If in the first section of *En diciembre* she tries to theorize Dora and Benito Suárez’s relationship through her grandmother’s psychoanalytical or Nietzschean perspective, and in the second section of the novel is influenced by Catalina and Eloisa’s feminist politics, it is only in the third section, under the influence of Aunt Irene, that she learns to ‘ir más lejos de su percepción de las cosas hasta alcanzar una nueva perspectiva’ (180) (Elston 818).

The system of knowledge embodied by aunt Irene is precisely that of art and creation. This is what allows Lina to “ir más lejos”. Thus, it comes as no surprise that this is the system that closes the novel and comes back again in the epilogue. After sampling all three possible languages that might aid her in her apprenticeship of signs and the search for truth, Lina chooses the one that most overtly acknowledges that truth is impossible, that the creation of further signs in art is the only possible path.

If the early and mid-twentieth century is the time of Freud, Nietzsche or feminism, which rely in the possibility of truth, the late-twentieth century is the time of a postmodern questioning of all metanarratives. As Gorton points out, “One could say there is a contrast here between a negative conceptualisation of desire and a positive or productive one and also a contrast between a (modern) search for meaning and a (postmodern) recognition of multiple interpretations” (Gorton 26). If Marcel is a modern narrator who still believes there is a truth to be found despite endless failures and his own musings on the impossibility of discovering such truth, Lina is a postmodern
narrator, comfortable in the knowledge, painful though it may be, that the best a truth seeker can hope for is the possibility of more signs. This shift, from modern to postmodern, can be understood in terms of desire.
Chapter 3: Intertextuality and the search for truth in *Fun Home*

Alison Bechdel’s 2006 *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* was almost universally praised by critics and readers, and quickly found its way into the growing canon of comics deemed “literary” enough to deserve serious academic attention. Its tapestry of allusions and references to canonical works of literature, mostly of the early twentieth century, gave the comic an air of highbrow validity which earned it a place next to Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* in the pantheon of comics read and discussed outside of the typical comics sphere. In the *New York Times* review of *Fun Home*, Wilsey described Bechdel’s memoir as a “slim yet Proustian graphic memoir […] the most ingeniously compact, hyper-verbose example of autobiography to have been produced” (Wilsey). He is not the only critic who would refer to the comic as a “proustian” work, but what precisely is “proustian” about it? There are plenty of allusions to Proust and his work, as well as a first-person narrator who muses on the problems of memory and remembers her childhood, her contact with homosexuality. But is that enough to make it proustian?

A great deal of critical attention has mentioned *Fun Home’s* connection to Proust without clearly defining what exactly the connection looks like and how it appears in the text. Most critics simply find a certain proustian air and choose to focus on Alison’s⁸ queerness as a way to access the text. Much like the critical work on Moreno focused on sexual liberation and excluded most formal concerns, Bechdel’s critics find Alison’s discovery of her homosexuality to be the most

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⁸ This chapter will refer to the diegetic protagonist as Alison and the author-narrator as Bechdel. The distinction between the character, the narrator and the author is, however, problematic, especially due to the non-fiction quality of the work. This is also a problem in the works of Moreno and Proust, and is perhaps another hallmark of texts that feature truth seekers.
important issue in the text. Iuliano, for example, attempts a reading of *Fun Home* in proustian terms, but focuses almost entirely on the discovery of sexual orientation. As he puts it, “sexual orientation becomes the primary site of individual identity” (Iuliano 287).

While Alison’s homosexuality and the fact that she remembers her childhood are essential parts of the comic, they do not fully account for what is precisely proustian about it. As this chapter will attempt to show, Bechdel’s Alison is a proustian truth seeker in the same way that Moreno’s Lina and Proust’s Marcel are truth seekers. Alison displays certain particularities in her search which correspond to the particularities of the medium of comics and Bechdel’s style, but shares key thematic and stylistic choices with the other authors analyzed here. Like Marcel and Lina, Alison is interested in uncovering the truth about someone in her life. Marcel wants to unmask those around him, particularly the women he desired, while Lina attempts to discover the truth about her friends and their husbands in an effort to understand Barranquilla society. Alison, on the other hand, is mostly interested in uncovering something about her father, his sexuality, his suicide and the “real” him she thinks she didn’t meet. Like other truth seekers, Alison notices the constant interplay between a character’s outward appearance and attitude and their “real”, hidden identity and is compelled to break down surfaces to find kernels of truth underneath.

Describing her father, Bruce Bechdel, and his obsession with the restoration of the family’s old house early in the comic, the narrator shows her father arranging a vase in a richly decorated room (Figure 1).

As he mutters the words “Slightly perfect”, the caption describes him as “an alchemist of appearance, a savant of surface, a Daedalus of décor” as Alison and one of her brothers look on from the adjoining room. The description works as a foreshadowing of sorts, a statement of
purpose for the narrator. Her father is a master at creating and maintaining appearances, not only in terms of interior decorations. As Alison begins what appears to be a tour of her own childhood and sexual discovery, she also embarks on a quest to understand her father’s true nature. This search, as it defines the content, but particularly the style of the comic, is what makes *Fun Home* a proustian text. Additionally, the fact that Alison is observing her father through the door frame suggests, as doors and windows often do, a certain degree of separation between the observer and the observed. Throughout the text, Alison will try to reduce that separation by framing her father in different ways.

The comparison between Bechdel and Proust cannot, however, be simple or direct. Two obvious differences separate the *Recherche* from *Fun Home*: the medium, literature and comics, and the genre, novel and autobiographic graphic narrative, which is to say, fiction and non-fiction. The problem of describing style in comics and comparing it to style in literature will be addressed further on. The distinction between fiction and non-fiction is, however, less complex. Even if Proust’s novel is, or at least pretends to be strictly fictional and Bechdel’s memoir purports to be completely non-fictional, both texts participate of the same model of truth-seeking. This is in keeping with the limits of autobiography in the twenty-first century. As Beat points out, “Post-structuralism in particular had deposed the unified subject of autobiography by positing discourse as preceding and exceeding the subject, calling the very basis of the genre’s distinctiveness into question” (Beaty 227). Both Proust and Bechdel have characters and narrators who attempt to discover truth hidden in signs around them, and both narrate the search and its ultimate effect. Marcel, Lina, and Alison are all truth seekers and all three become novelists. While the limits between fiction and autobiography are porous in all three authors, their works all have the form of
a *Künstlerroman*. What is particular about the comics form in Bechdel is that Alison will try to use it to decipher signs in two, often competing and contradictory systems, graphic and verbal.

As Chute explains, *Fun Home* is interested in “reading” the father while pinning him down in graphic form. “*Fun Home* explores the legibility of the father figure at its center, allowing the author the intimacy of touching her father through drawing him, while suggesting that the form of comics crucially retains the insolvable gaps of family history” (Chute 175). Chute correctly notes the attempt to cover or solve the lacunae in Alison’s understanding of her family history and her grasp on her father’s identity. She also notes that the comics form that Alison will eventually master is incapable of filling all gaps and answering all questions. This will become, as this chapter will show, the defining characteristic of Bechdel’s search. Try as she might to draw and pin him down, she will never completely understand him. In this way, she is similar to both Marcel and Lina.

On the other hand, the main differences between Proust’s truth seeker and Bechdel’s are twofold. On one hand, Alison’s approach to signs is based on intertextuality and a process which will be described here as key-swapping. On the other hand, the nature of Alison’s desire is different form Marcel’s. Like Lina in *En diciembre llegaban las brisas*, Alison desires the object of her curiosity, but unlike Lina and Marcel, she is not interested in possessing the object of her desire or using it as a starting point for literary production.

The first particularity in Bechdel’s truth seeking is intertextual key-swapping. This refers to the way in which the narrator tries to break into the signs her father presents. If a sign is to be imagined as a clam that conceals a pearl of truth, keys would be differently shaped knives the seeker uses to try and break open the clam. The first image the reader encounters in *Fun Home* is a photograph that serves as the title card for the first chapter. It is a reproduction of a family
photograph that depicts a young Bruce Bechdel, shirtless, looking at the camera. The picture is copied and pasted into the text, but carefully recreated in Bechdel’s own hand. This style, single-color and made up of cross-hatching lines, will appear again in almost every picture and document that is inserted in *Fun Home*. The caption of the first image, “Old Father, Old Artificer” (Bechdel 2) contains the first example of key-swapping. As the narrator tries to understand her father, both graphically and verbally, she will try out different “keys”, intertextual references and documents, that might allow her to access her father’s true self. In this example, Bechdel juxtaposes the photograph, a biographical document, with the literary reference to Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. The literary reference could allow Alison to understand her father in literary terms. As the comic progresses, Alison will try out other keys, many taken from works of literature, to see if they can, as Deleuze would put it, break open the sign.

On the other hand, the nature of Alison’s desire, which is different from Marcel’s and Lina’s, separates her from other truth seekers. While Marcel desires in order to possess and Lina feels a more positive sort of desire that leads her to creation rather than possession, Alison desires in a different way. First, unlike other proustian truth seekers, her desire is focused almost exclusively on one or two signs. And, on the other hand, Alison desires her father not to possess him, but to understand him enough to somehow become him. The diffusion of her identity with her father’s will be a hallmark of her truth-seeking: as she strives to understand Bruce Bechdel’s death and homosexuality, she will start to understand her own homosexuality; as she digs into his love of books, she will make up her own reading list.

The particularities of intertextual key-swapping and the nature of desire in Bechdel’s *Fun Home* will be discussed in detail further on. However, a brief recap of the theoretical basis for truth seeking as an essentially proustian form will prove useful here. After a review of Deleuze’s work
on Proust and a discussion of what “style” means in comics and how it can be observed, described and, compared to Proust’s, this chapter will show how intertextual key-swapping is the basic mode of truth seeking in comics. Finally, this chapter will conclude that Bechdel’s failure to break open any of the signs she encounters is not a failure at all, but a sign that she is firmly planted in postmodernity, content to exist in a rhizomatic system of superficiality in which deep truth is neither possible nor desirable.

Theoretical underpinning

Taking the work of Gilles Deleuze in *Proust and Signs* as a starting point, previous chapters arrived at a definition of a type of character-narrator who interacts with the world in a particular way. These characters are young, sensitive artists-in-the-making who feel ill at ease in the world around them. As they grow in a social milieu that favors image and appearance over sincerity, they find themselves unable to accept that what they see is what really is. Driven by curiosity, often to an obsessive degree, they try to find the kernel of truth they believe lies beneath outward appearances. In Deleuze’s terms, they inhabit a world made up of signs. These signs, which can take the form of people, events, works of art or places, must be broken into, forced to give up the truth they hide.

Texts that feature truth seekers narrate the apprenticeship in decoding these characters go through. This apprenticeship is the overarching organizing principle of these texts, which are often read by critics in terms of one of the truth seeker’s concerns. In Proust, memory or jealousy are traditionally considered to be the main anxieties in the *Recherche*. In Moreno, it is female sexual liberation and patriarchal society, while most criticism on *Fun Home* has focused on the discovery of same sex desire. These issues are undoubtedly key to a comprehensive reading of these texts,
but only if they are understood as an expression of truth seeking. Deleuze correctly notes, referring to the *Recherche*, that “What is essential in the Search is not memory and time, but the sign and truth. What is essential is not to remember, but to learn.” (Deleuze 91). This same can be said of Moreno and Bechdel. All three authors, and their protagonists, are primarily concerned with the sign and the truth it hides. It is no surprise then that all three narrate what Deleuze describes as the apprenticeship of a man (or woman), or letters. The novelist, or in Bechdel’s case, the graphic novelist, is best suited to face off against a world of signs in their search for truth, a search which is always expressed in the style.

In comics, as in traditional literature, style is the textual embodiment of the search. The medium of comics, as it will become apparent in the following section, is made up of the unresolved tensions between its two constituent levels of meaning, the graphic and the verbal. Coupled with the awareness of the act of narration, these tensions, contradictions, and gaps are the basis of proustian style in Bechdel’s comic. What is important here, however, is that the tensions in the comics page cannot and should not be completely resolved. If Alison learns anything in her search is that conflicting impulses and contradictory evidence need not be reconciled.

The unresolved tension is also expressed in Bechdel’s intention with regards to autobiography and fiction. As a self-referential text, *Fun Home* narcissistically\(^9\) calls attention to the fact that it is a textual artifact concerned with narrating its own creation. The narrator wonders if her attempts at journal-keeping are capable of recording reality as it exists. Describing her own doubt on the matter, the narrator comments that

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\(^9\) For a definition and discussion on narcissistic narratives, see Linda Hutcheon: (Hutcheon 7)
It was a sort of epistemological crisis. How did I know that the things I was writing were absolutely, objectively true? My simple declarative sentences began to strike me as hubristic at best, utter lies at worst. The most sturdy nouns faded to faint approximations under my pen” (Bechdel 141).

This attitude is not new to “literary” comics. In fact, many of the comics that have been deemed worthy of critical and academic attention are, in fact, graphic memoirs\(^\text{10}\) in which the author-narrator reflects on their discovery of comics as a meaningful medium for self-expression and self-exploration.

In Bechdel’s work, this doubt is not merely a narrative device. She is truly unsure of her capabilities as a chronicler of her life, but is also aware that this is hardly a problem. In this sense, Chute’s definition of “graphic narrative” will prove useful here:

*Graphic narrative* designates a book-length work composed in the medium of comics. […] as they deliberately place stress on official histories and traditional modes of transmitting history, they are deeply invested in their own accuracy and historicity. They are texts that either claim nonfiction status or choose, as Lynda Barry’s invented term “autobifictionalography” well indicates, to reject the categories of nonfiction and fiction altogether in their self-representational storylines. (Chute 3)

As Chute points out, texts such as these reject the distinction between fiction and non-fiction, a

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\(^{10}\)See, for example, Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis*, David Small’s *Stiches*, Harvey Pekar’s *American Splendor*, David B’s *Epileptic*, among others. For a more detailed look at the role of autobiography in independent comics, see Beaty.
move that allows them to explore autobiographical events as their particular styles demand it while commenting on the process of remembrance, writing, and the medium of comics itself. The lack of this distinction between novel and graphic narrative also allows this chapter to compare Bechdel’s work with novels by Proust and Moreno. The following section will discuss how style, and specifically proustian style, can be observed, discussed and described in *Fun Home* as it relates to truth seeking.

Style in Comics

The question of how style, and specifically proustian style, appears in Bechdel’s work is a question of how the proustian sentence can be translated into the medium of comics. The first chapter showed how Proust’s famously long sentences work by creating a system of apparent certainty, followed by a meandering middle portion which leads to a final, disappointing discovery. This type of sentence structure, which mirrors the overall structure of the novel, creates a tension between the beginning of the sentence, in which the narrator feels a certain degree of certainty, and the end, in which he discovers his initial observations are incorrect. This tension between beginning and end is essentially a tension between knowing and not knowing. Or, to put it in Deleuzian terms, it is a tension between sign and truth: the sign has the outward appearance of sincerity, but only by breaking into it can the narrator discover the truth it is hiding. This process, described in the first chapter, is called unmasking, and it is the apprenticeship of a man of letters described by Deleuze.

While the stylistic phenomenon is easily observed in a work of traditional literature, it is less evident in comics. However, the comics form has a singular advantage when it comes to creating a style made up of tensions because these are essential components of the medium.
Hatfield suggests that comics, and a comprehensive reading of comics, “must grapple with four tensions that are fundamental to the art form: between codes of signification; between the single image and the image-in-series; between narrative sequence and page surface; and, more broadly, between reading-as-experience and the text as material object” (Hatfield 132). By codes of signification, Hatfield is simply referring to the two main components of the form: words and pictures. Pictures are, or may appear to be, obvious and open, while words are abstract and coded. The tension between the two codes produces meaning by juxtaposing them in ways that can be complimentary, explanatory or contradictory. They can complement each other, but they can also complicate each other, and this is where meaning is created.

The other tensions Hatfield describes are also in play in proustian comics style. On one hand, the tension between a single image and an image-in-series takes place when one panel represents an action in motion and the following panel depicts the continuation of that motion. An experienced reader knows to expect that if a panel shows a character initiating an action, throwing a punch, for example, the following panel should show the conclusion of that action: landing the punch. The tension exists because each single image represents an instant, frozen in time, in which no motion actually takes place. But the series shows the passage of time as if it were an uninterrupted flow. This is the process Scott McCloud refers to as “closure” (McCloud 63), which complements Hatfield’s concept of “breakdown”\(^\text{11}\). When the comics artist uses this tension to call attention to a narrative conceit by, for example, withholding information about the amount of time

\(^{11}\) In fact, ‘breakdown’ and ‘closure’ are complementary terms, both describing the relationship between sequence and series: the author’s task is to evoke an imagined sequence by creating a visual series (breakdown), whereas the reader’s task is to translate the given series into a narrative sequence by achieving closure. Again, the reader’s role is crucial, and requires the invocation of learned competencies; the relationships between pictures are a matter of convention, not inherited connectedness. (Hatfield 135)
that passes between one panel and the next, or by initiating an action on one panel and not showing its conclusion in the one that follows, they can manipulate the reader’s curiosity in order to recreate the narrator’s. In Bechdel’s case, this is a powerful tool for recreating Proust’s style because it simulates the uncertainty a reader may feel when Proust’s narrator jumps from one narrative level to another or, more importantly, from one time period to another.

Finally, the last tension Hatfield describes is that between narrative sequence and the page, which will here be referred to with the French term planche. Planche refers to the particular layout of the panels, captions and speech bubbles and can be useful to differentiate between the layout of the page and the page as a material experience. A reader knows that a comics planche begins in the top left and must be read from top to bottom and left to right. The reader, however, can look at the entire page at any time. He can choose to look at all the pictures before reading the words, or read the text quickly while barely glancing at the images. This is a particularity exclusive to comics (Hatfield 144), and it allows artists like Bechdel to create planches that create contradictions or complications among the first panel and the last and between each panel and the planche as a holistic unit that may convey a meaning that ironizes or complicates the meanings of individual panels or sequences.

These three tensions, between words and pictures, panels and series, and sequences and the planche, can all be observed in the following page, taken from the first chapter of Fun Home (Figure 2). In it, the narrator continues her comparison between Bruce Bechdel and Daedalus. The

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12 Hatfield discusses the importance of materiality and the physical experience of handling a comic, but since that plays no key role in this reading of Bechdel’s work, it will not be explained here. For a more detailed look into the effects of physicality, see my work on Chris Ware’s Building Stories.
captions appear to have little to do with the images. The pictures show a young Alison break a carafe and escape her father’s anger and return home after an unspecified amount of time. Taken separately, words and pictures appear to tell two different, even contradictory, stories. The fourth panel, for example, shows Alison escaping her house precisely as the caption reads “Escape was impossible”. This is an example of tension between words and pictures, which, in this case, results in irony.

By looking at the image series, another type of tension becomes apparent. The sequence begins with an interior scene, and the first four panels describe a short amount of time, as Alison sees her father, turns to run, grabs her jacket and jumps out of the house. These panels establish a certain pace, each showing Alison in motion. This sequence shows a consistent rhythm. The final two panels, however, have a decidedly different pace, which shocks the reader as the narration suddenly halts and goes from a four-panel sequence that depicts only a few seconds to a two-panel sequence that depicts a much longer time, hours perhaps. The effect is compounded by the fact that all panels have the same shape and size, so the reader expects them to cover the same amount of time\(^\text{13}\). It is impossible for the reader to know how much time has elapsed between the fourth and fifth and between the fifth and sixth.

This elasticity in the representation of time changes the nature of the planche. It goes from a narration of an anecdote to the description of a general attitude and mood of her childhood home, something that is likely a routine. It changes the narration from a past perfect to an imperfect tense. This is an example of how tensions between individual panels and sequences can be used to create meaning.

\(^{13}\) For a description of how time, in comics is represented in space, see McCloud. (McCloud 100)
Finally, the entire planche is a clear example of the tensions at work within a single page. The two narrative sequences appear to tell a linear story, but the planche, taken holistically, tells a cyclical story. The first panel is dominated by the dark figure of Bruce Bechdel. The following four panels are bright, as Alison manages to escape his influence. The final panel is dominated by darkness once again as she returns home. Ironically, this final darkness is broken by the image of the brightly lit Christmas tree, which suggests some sort of happy resolution and, simultaneously, foreshadows the revelation waiting in the first panel of the following page. By looking at the first panel, along with its caption, the looming figure appears to be the half-man, half-bull monster in Daedalus’ labyrinth, a decidedly violent, oppressive image of Alison’s father. The meandering middle eventually leads to another panel dominated by darkness, this one with a caption that reads “…or just disappointed by the design failure?”. The final panel replaces the previous version of Bruce-as-Minotaur with a different, contradictory version: Bruce-as-Daedalus, a somewhat pathetic figure, unsure about the quality of his work. This is precisely the same motion that takes place in a proustian sentence: from one certainty, through a meandering middle, to a disappointing unmasking. Additionally, the final certainty of Bruce as an insecure designer is once again quickly shattered in the first panel of the following page (Figure 3):

A content Bruce Bechdel looks unto the Christmas scene from outside a door frame. Without the captions, the image suggests a happy family scene, a victory for the previously insecure designer who has pulled off a difficult feat. The captions, however, once again contradict the newly formed identity by calling attention to the fact that many of Bruce Bechdel’s grandest designs were feats of appearance. Here, things are further complicated by two levels of captions,
one within the panel, another without. What is clear is that any certainty as to the real identity of Bruce Bechdel is subject to sudden and violent shattering.

In this way, proustian style appears in Bechdel’s comic in the tension between words and pictures, such as the panel cited above. Along with the tensions within the planche, they are Bechdel’s equivalent of the proustian sentence, the stylistic embodiment of proustian truth seeking. They perform and give life to the narrator’s attempt to break into a sign and the discovery not of a final truth but of a second sign, a mask under the mask. These tensions also illustrate the process of apprenticeship and the inevitable failure of truth seeking, as signs only reveal further signs, never a permanent truth.

The following section will explore how these stylistic expressions relate to and express Alison’s search for truth in a process called intertextual key-swapping. These two stylistic particularities, formal tensions and key-swapping, are the result of a proustian search carried out in the medium of comics. They are also the result of the intersection between Bechdel’s autobiographical intentions, the type of desire she feels and her ultimately postmodern relation to the notion of truth.

Intertextual Key-swapping

As is the case with the works of Marcel Proust and Marvel Moreno, a somewhat detailed understanding of the type of desire that drives the protagonist-narrator will shed light on their type of truth seeking. While Proust’s Marcel desires to possess, and Moreno’s Lina feels a kind of desire that leads her towards production, Bechdel’s Alison wants to understand Bruce Bechdel in order to become him, or, at the very least, understand him in terms of herself and herself in terms of him. This is evident in the fourth chapter, entitled “In the Shadow of Young Girls in Bloom”. Here,
Alison and her father admire a spread in *Esquire Magazine* that depicts a recumbent man, with open shirt and blazer that show his muscular abdomen. Both Alison and her father admire the pictures and Alison says, “You should get a suit with a vest”, to which her father responds, “Nice. I should”. The captions, however, explain the differences in their desire. While Bruce is sexually attracted to the man, Alison is attracted to him for different reasons: “But I wanted the muscles and tweed like my father like my father wanted the velvet and pearls-subjectively for myself. The objects of our desire were quite different” (Bechdel 99).

In the same way her father desires pearls and pretty dresses, which he has been forcing Alison to wear, because he wants to be feminine, Alison desires muscles and tweed to be masculine. It is true that the objects of their desire are different, but their type of desire is essentially the same. In the previous page, standing in front of a mirror, a young Alison is wearing a dress described as the “least girly dress in the store” (Bechdel 98). Her father is wearing a velvet suit that might upstage the bride and the caption reads “Not only were we invets. We were inversions of one another”. This comment aptly describes the type of desire Alison feels, not only with regards to the men in magazines but with regards to the signs she is trying to decipher, particularly the three main signs that will trouble her throughout: her father, herself and their relation to homosexuality.

In order to break these signs, Alison employs a technique called intertextual key-swapping. This is a unique way in which Bechdel utilizes the particularities of the comics medium while still participating of the proustian style described in the previous section. Like any truth seeker, Alison is faced with signs that hide truths, signs that she must attempt to decipher in order to satisfy the curiosity that drives her. Intertextual key-swapping is the process whereby the narrator tries out different systems of reference, media, documents or intertextual connections to see if they allow
her to break into the sign. These are tried out in a cycle of hesitant motions, as the narrator proposes a key that could work and quickly abandons it when it does not. The most apt word to describe this is perhaps the French *essayer*. It conveys a certain tentativeness, as of someone testing to see which, if any, of the keys they are holding fits a door. In *Fun Home*, Bechdel will try out at least six types of intertextual keys. This process is in keeping with her type of desire and her stylistic choices, as it allows for the juxtaposition essential to the tensions in comics. Key-swapping also underscores the way in which Bechdel’s memoir goes beyond the limits of traditional autobiography because it allows her to erase the limits between the individual and the object of her desire. The preponderance of discursive over the unified subject in autobiography in comics described by Beaty (Beaty 227) fits in well with the tentative nature of key-swapping, as it allows for a lack of finality and conclusive discovery.

The method of trying out is mostly applied to the father; Alison’s exploration of his identity, his sexuality and his death will have the most varied types of keys. The method, however, is also applied to Alison herself. Early on in the text, a young Alison ponders about what it means to be a part of her family and what it means to be Alison. Since her identity and her place in the family is a sign she is trying to decipher, she turns to an intertextual key that might shed some light on her identity (Figure 4). Interestingly, comics provide a suitable key for Alison before she learns to read. She describes the experience as “confusing us with the Addams family”. This suggests that even from this early age, Alison is interested in finding out about herself, but is not preoccupied with finding or creating a unified identity. Instead, she is content to juxtapose two panels: the first, a scene from her childhood, the second, a scene from the Addams Family comic. In this way, she understands a part of her identity, a part of the sign she is deciphering, in terms of a text. In the second panel, Alison’s face and hands are visible in the frame as she holds the book.
This is a technique Bechdel uses often: she reproduces one of the keys she is trying out but inserts parts of herself, usually her hands, in the panel. This calls attention to the idea that every type of intertextual reference that appears in *Fun Home* is mediated by Alison. As Chute points out with regards to Bechdel’s habit of inserting different types of documents and texts, the “difference in her process of rearchiving is that the documents are reinflected with her own hand” (Chute 186).

This is evident in the following two panels, in the next page (Figure 5). Here, Bechdel juxtaposes a second key with the first. By copying a photograph of herself as a child and using it to compare with a panel taken from an Addams Family comic, she is trying to see if together they will allow her to break open the sign of her identity. The tensions that grow out of this juxtaposition, in this case between the single image and the sequence, do not reveal any great truth: “The resemblance in my first-grade school photo is eerie” is not a profound revelation, it is simply a provisional, apparent certainty. And it is a certainty that will be quickly revoked. In typical proustian fashion, the revelation at the end of the sentence (or planche) is replaced with another which, in turn, will not be very permanent.

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The full breadth and depth of key-swapping, however, is on full display when applied to Bruce Bechdel. *Fun Home* has at least six different keys that are juxtaposed in the text in order to crack open the sign that is Alison’s father. These are all intertextual references which are, in one way or another, reproduced in Bechdel’s own hand. The six types are: characters taken from canonic works of literature; authors and literary figures; maps; queer history and books about queerness; entries in the dictionary, and finally, family photographs. In addition to these, there are legal documents, film and television, personal letters (typed and hand-written), medical jargon, and, plays. These six main types of keys are the source of many of the tensions that make up the medium of comics in service of the proustian search for truth.

The first, and perhaps most common, type of key is taken from canonical works of literature, mostly from the early twentieth century. In fact, the text opens with a reference to Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist*: “Old Father, Old Artificer” (Bechdel 2). The photograph shows a young, shirtless Bruce looking coquettishly at the camera. The literary reference sets up the dynamics of key-swapping in the entire text: a quest to break down the façades of the old artificer. The caption also suggests that an understanding of Joyce can provide some clue that could help Alison (and the reader) decipher the picture that accompanies it.

The next page, the first proper planche in the comic, provides another key which both replaces and expands upon the first. It depicts a young Alison playing with her father. The captions compare him to Icarus and, later, to his father Daedalus (Bechdel 4). This complicates the initial reference, as it is now adds the character of Stephen Daedalus to both Greek characters. The images, on the other hand, add another key taken from literature. As the two are playing on the
floor, a copy of *Anna Karenina* lies on the floor. It foreshadows Bruce’s eventual suicide (he jumps in front of a truck, so in a way, he is also Anna). These are only a few of the literary masks Bruce Bechdel will wear throughout the text. Every time a new one appears, it both replaces and complicates the previous one. They all prove insufficient: they reveal very little about him and are never permanent. Later on, Bruce will be both Stephen and Bloom, Marcel and Gilberte; Alison will be Odysseus, and also Stephen, Bloom, Daedalus, and Icarus (Bechdel 214).

In another type of key, Bechdel also tries out famous writers as philosophers who could describe and decipher her father. She first compares him to F. Scott Fitzgerald, first by describing his love of his books and later by reproducing, again by hand, letters in which Bruce quotes from Fitzgerald (Bechdel 63). A few pages later, in a caption, Bechdel proposes a reason for key-swapping:

> I employ these allusions to James and Fitzgerald not only as descriptive devices, but because my parents are most real to me in fictional terms. And perhaps my cool aesthetic distance does more to convey the arctic climate of our family than any literary comparison (Bechdel 67).

When she compares her father to Fitzgerald (and also Zelda), she juxtaposes passages from his books with letters written by her father precisely because the tentative nature of key-swapping allows her to put both on the same textual level, something that gives the comparison a feeling of reality, even if she suspects it is a temporary illusion. In other sections, she discards Fitzgerald and, while trying to understand her father’s suicide, he becomes a facsimile of Albert Camus. A passage from Camus’ *A Happy Death* and a picture of him is juxtaposed with a photograph of Bruce himself (Bechdel 47). The comparison, once again, is not successful in explaining Bruce. In
fact, Bechdel tries out keys and quickly abandons them as soon as they prove insufficient; she does not mention Fitzgerald or Camus again.

Maps represent a particularly interesting type of key. Like comics, maps convey information by juxtaposing text and images in order to create meaning. What is most telling is that both comics and maps use this combination of words and pictures in an attempt to capture and express reality. Cartographers and comics artist know that the real world cannot be contained in a two-dimensional plane. This means that the best possible outcome is an abstraction of the world which codifies information in a system of signs. Using the same method as before, Bechdel reproduces the maps in her own hand. In the first case, she inserts a map of her home town of Beech Creek, Pennsylvania.

The map offers Alison insight into her father’s identity, and she appropriates it by overlaying a circle which contains four places that play a key role in Bruce’s life (Figure 6). The panel on the left contains a list of places, while the caption in the middle questions the validity of any conclusion that might be drawn from the map. In fact, while trying to decipher Bruce’s suicide and the possible causes for his unhappiness, she proposes a look at the maps of his life, as they may hold some clue that could break open that sign. This is to say that, faced with a sign that does not give up its truth easily, Bechdel tries out a type of key she has not tried yet. The map, as the caption says, suggests a certain provincialism, but that is not an accurate depiction of Bruce Bechdel’s life. In fact, the map offers contradictory information. On the next page, the narrator concludes this attempt with the realization that she is confused: “But it is puzzling why my urbane father, with his unwholesome interest in the decorative arts, remained in this provincial hamlet” (Bechdel 31). The conclusion, that he is a provincial person because the major events in his life take place inside a one-mile radius, is once again shattered almost as quickly as it comes up.
In another section, Bechdel reproduces another type of map with the intention of figuring out a different sign. As she tries to understand the nature of her father’s, as well as her own, she reproduces a map from Kenneth Grahame’s *The Wind in the Willows.* This is juxtaposed with another map of Beech Creek. The comparison between the fictional, literary, Wild Wood and the prosaic Beech Creek offers little actual insight on the impact the place had on her father and his eventual identity and suicide. It does, however, allow Bechdel to reflect on the nature of her craft.

Once again, she finds a sign she cannot break open and tries out a type of key that could reveal the truth. When that proves disappointing, she diverts her attention to another issue that has been troubling her over the previous pages: the problematic relation between words and images. The maps, however, don’t offer any conclusive answer with regards to that either, so she discards them as well and never mentions them again.

A third major sign Bechdel is interested in is her and her father’s homosexuality. However, the history of the queer experience in the United States, along with the books that defined it, are also another type of key she tries out. This suggests that certain things can be both signs and keys that could break open other signs. In her discovery of her sexuality, Alison comes into contact with a long list of canonical books about lesbianism and feminism. She also visits places that are important to queer history in America, such as the Stonewall Inn and other parts of Lower Manhattan and the sights of the early AIDS epidemic. At first glance, her reading appears to be only about her own experience. It is, however, also a way to understand her father’s homosexuality and, through it, understand herself. As Kelley points out,

As a result, *Fun Home* is consciously in dialogue with feminist literature, the GLBTQ movement and its literature, and the graphic narrative genre. Bechdel creates something
that by its very existence is cross-discursive – with itself, and with the culture in which it slowly came to be. […] In the experience of her own sexuality, in the vicarious experience of her father’s, in the affective bond at first inhibited and, later, strengthened by their mutual ‘predilection’, *Fun Home* captures just this kind of cross-discursive fusion. (Kelley 56)

What Kelley describes as “cross-discursive” is the juxtaposition of words and pictures typical of comics, but also the juxtaposition of two experiences, Alison’s and Bruce’s and two types of history, the personal and the political. To this, Bechdel adds several layers of references, documents, and artifacts that add to the growingly complex overlay. The tensions, discoveries and disappointments that grow out of this overlay provide the structure for her search. Queer history and thought, like previous keys, prove ineffectual; they lead to more questions and speculations rather than the simple answer one might suspect lies hidden inside a sign, like a pearl inside a clam.

In her research on lesbianism, Alison consults a source that may seem obvious, perhaps so obvious that it does not need to be cited or painstakingly reproduced by hand: the dictionary. She looks up the words “queer”, “lesbian”, “father”, and “beget”. For each one, she reproduces the entire page of the dictionary, and sometimes highlights the relevant parts of the definitions. When she looks up “father”, the definition provides little more than a meaningless tautology (Bechdel 199). Still, the entries are faithfully drawn by hand.

When she looks up the word queer, hoping it might tell her something about her own sexuality, or her father’s, it instead offers insight into his death. It seems as if her father and his death fit into all the possible definitions of the word: abnormal, suspect, unwell, counterfeit. She concludes her research in the dictionary, in a caption, by saying: “It left me feeling qualmish, faint,
and, on occasion, drunk. But most compellingly at the time, his death was bound up for me with the one definition conspicuously missing from our mammoth Webster”’ (Bechdel 57). The disappointment is not altogether disheartening. The final two panels complete the cycle of the proustian sentence: the reproduction of the dictionary page leads to disappointment, but it also leads to a temporary certainty. From this point on, Alison will try to fill in the missing parts of the dictionary by trying to understand queerness. This certainty will also eventually be shattered.

Finally, the most notable key that Bechdel uses in her search for truth is the reproduction of family photographs. Every chapter in the *Fun Home* starts with a photograph, and the only double page in the book contains a richly reproduced picture Bruce Bechdel took of one of his young lovers. In interviews, Bechdel has said that that picture was the starting point for her writing process and her curiosity about his father’s real identity (Chute and Bechdel). In the final caption of the two-page photo, which sits conspicuously almost in the exact middle of the book, a centerfold of curiosity and desire, Bechdel notices that the part of the date has been effaced (Figure 9). She realizes the contradictory nature of her father’s appearance and the eventual contradictions of gathering and reproducing photos and documents. They give the book an air of a well-researched autobiography, as if they were gathered by a completely objective investigator. However, more than half of the planche is taken up by Alison’s hand. Once again, this is a reminder of her constant mediation. As Gennero points out, “Tradurre la fotografia in disegno esplicita dal punto di vista formale la presenza inevitabile di una rilettura, di un tentativo di spiegazione che abbandona l’orizzonte fittizio dell’oggettività per approdare a quello, sempre mutevole, dell’interpretazione” (Gennero 73). The abandonment of objectivity is, paradoxically perhaps, the fulfilment of Bechdel’s brand of truth seeking. Throughout the text, she has been unsure about her ability to
accurately record reality, but, unlike Marcel, she is not overly troubled by it. Everything in *Fun Home* is carefully researched and documented, but it is also deliberately put in a process which, through drawing, captioning and layout, relieve it of any objectivity. In another part of the book, after copying a page from her diary in which she laments missing a school dance, a caption adds “My profession of disappointment at missing the game and dance was an utter falsehood, of course” (Bechdel 183). Her willingness to lie, to herself and the reader, about certain events does not betray any sort of confidence because lies, appearances and surfaces are the basic building blocks of this world.

There is, however, a question that remains. Why take the time to painstakingly draw pictures, pages, diary entries and all manner of legal documents? If they prove ultimately fruitless, why keep them in the book at all? The answer points to the importance of documentation in *Fun Home*. By inserting these documents, Bechdel achieves a two-fold stylistic choice that embodies the proustian search for truth. On one hand, the tentative nature of key-swapping reproduces the middle, meandering sections of the proustian sentence. In these collections of subordinate clauses and digressions, Marcel works through his initial certainty to find a disappointing discovery, the unmasking that ends the sentence. On the other hand, Bechdel’s penchant for intertextuality and documentation allows her to mediate and modify every type of key she tries out. This process ensures that every document is recodified by passing through Bechdel’s hand. Instead of citing a page or picture, she cites her understanding, her rendering of that page or picture. The inevitable result of this method is the failure of truth seeking. By turning possible keys into signs, Bechdel fulfills Deleuze’s prediction with regards to an ultimate truth: “We are wrong to believe in facts; there are only signs. We are wrong to believe in truth; there are only interpretations” (Deleuze 92).
For Moreno, who was embedded in Parisian intellectual milieu of the 1980s, and Bechdel, a twenty-first century writer, this may be an obvious conclusion, which would explain why Lina and Alison’s failure is not as traumatic as it is for Marcel. For Proust, however, the impossibility of truth, as observed by Deleuze in 1977, was revolutionary. This may explain, at least in part, the different reactions each truth seeker has with regards to their failure. While Marcel feels a combination of pleasure and pain at each disappointing discovery, Lina and Alison are mostly unfazed by them.

This is in keeping with both Bechdel’s style and her type of desire. Since she is not fully committed to finding an ultimate truth about her father and herself, she is content to simply propose possible, if ultimately imperfect, interpretations about them, about what those truths may be. Chute notices this attitude and describes it by saying that “The book does not seek to preserve the past as it was, as its archival obsession might suggest, but rather to circulate ideas about the past with gaps fully intact” (Chute 180). The gaps remain intact for two reasons: first, because there simply is no complete truth. As Marcel painfully finds out, and never truly accepts, every sign leads only to other signs. Also, the gaps remain because they are essential to the medium of comics. Chute points out that the planche is made up of gaps, as much as it is made up of words and pictures. Whatever Alison achieves after her search is bound to be full of holes and inconsistencies, the difference is that for Bechdel, those holes are of her own making. She is, like all truth seekers, left only with the skills of decoding, the result of her apprenticeship which turned her into a woman of letters who produced the text itself.

The last planche of the chapter entitled “In the Shadow of Young Girls in Bloom” provides a final example of how intertextual key-swapping is applied to the medium of comics. The
combination of the tensions inherent to the medium and the insertion of mediated documents is the textual embodiment of proustian truth seeking. The planche starts with a picture of a young Bruce wearing a girl’s bathing suit. The picture has appeared once before, opening the chapter and captioned with the title of the second volume of the *Recherche*. Several pages are dedicated to a discussion on the different translations of that volume, from the more literal “In the Shadow of Young Girls in Bloom” to the decidedly less erotic “Within a Budding Grove”. The picture also leads a discussion of Proust’s term “invert”, which he uses to refer to homosexuals. Alison finds it quaint and incomplete, but also appropriate for her relationship with her father. They are, after all, inverts of one another: “I was Spartan to my father’s Athenian. Modern to his Victorian. Butch to his nelly. Utilitarian to his aesthete” (Bechdel 15).

In this planche (Figure 10) Bechdel continues her method of juxtaposing apparently disparate keys in an attempt to break open a sign. The first photograph is itself a sign, a mystery that could contain some hidden truth. But because it has appeared before in relation to Proust and homosexuality it is loaded with an additional layer of meaning. Once again, Alison’s hand underscores the idea that she the picture passed through the filter of her own drawing, yet another level of meaning.

The picture then provides several versions of Bruce: he is a version of Gilberte when Marcel sees her through the bushes in Swann’s garden; he is a female version of himself, not necessarily the closet homosexual who tries to pick up college boys, as he will be later on in the comic, simply feminine. The second caption displays the typical tentativeness of Bechdel’s truth seeking: it features a question, followed quickly by a response that does not definitively answer it. Her conclusion, “he seems lissome, elegant”, seems final, only it appears to contradict every other conclusion about him she has reached: he has been a violent, menacing figure, a man of the world,
an avid reader, a mediocre scholar, a man of the world, and a small-town intellectual. Importantly however, this new version of Bruce is not really a contradiction as it does not undo or negate previous masks Bruce has worn.

The final panel offers another juxtaposition, one which illustrates once again proustian style in Bechdel. The previous photograph lies in the background, while, in the foreground, Alison’s hands hold two pictures, one of her father, one of herself. The captions compare the expressions and body language and provide a tentative connections in the form of questions that cannot be answered. The final caption concludes with the realization that Bruce and Alison are translations of each other. Only a few pages earlier, she concluded they were inverts of one another, but now the intertextual key-swapping has provided another, different interpretation.Translations, as the narrator points out, are always imperfect and full of gaps. In this way, Bruce and Alison are imperfect signs of each other in the same way a translation is a sign of the original text: it contains, hidden in its language, the true form of the original. Any attempt to find it however, in translation and in truth seeking, is doomed to fail.

In this way, Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* has a narrator with all the characteristics of a proustian truth seeker. Bechdel uses the particular tensions inherent to the medium of comics, combined with intertextual key-swapping, in her quest to decipher a world of signs around her. She tries out different types of texts, documents and photographs as keys which may help her break open the signs she wants to decipher. This juxtaposition-based approach ultimately fails. Like Lina and Marcel, Alison does not discover a final kernel of truth. Alison, however, is different in one essential way: she is not truly interested in complete understanding and access to a final truth. This makes her an especially postmodern truth seeker, not only because she chooses a medium and a
style that works well with pastiche and superficiality, but also because there is no discomfort or pain in her discoveries. Disappointment and neurosis are a staple of Marcel’s truth-seeking experience, but Alison tries out, and painlessly discards, every possible version of the truth she uncovers. Very early on, in fact, she proposes that “Perhaps affectation can be so thoroughgoing, so authentic in its details, that it stops being pretense and becomes, for all practical purposes, real” (Bechdel 60).

There is, in a very postmodern way, only surface, with nothing hidden below it other than more surface. There is also no possible ending: the book starts with the idea that Alison and Bruce Bechdel are like Icarus and Daedalus and it ends with the same image, inverted but simultaneously equivalent: they are both Icarus and Daedalus. The question of whether Bechdel continues to create proustian truth seekers in other works remains. Her second graphic narrative, Are you my mother (2012) attempts to reproduce the format of Fun Home, this time focusing on Bechdel’s mother. Although most intertextual references in that book come from psychoanalysis, it might still be considered proustian. Further study might consider other “literary” autobiographical graphic narratives about curious young people who try to understand something about the world around them and, in the process, become men and women of letters, or, more precisely, letters and pictures.
Images cited

Figure 1: Bruce Bechdel composes a perfect domestic scene. *(Bechdel 6)*
Indeed, the result of that scheme—a half-bull, half-man monster—inspired Daedalus’s greatest creation yet. He hid the Minotaur in the labyrinth—a maze of passages and rooms opening endlessly into one another...

...and from which, as stray youths and maidens discovered to their peril...

...escape was impossible.

Then there are those famous wings. Was Daedalus really stricken with grief when Icarus fell into the sea? Or just disappointed by the design failure?

Alison attempts to escape from her father’s influence (Bechdel 12)
Sometimes, when things were going well, I think my father actually enjoyed having a family.

Or at least, the air of authenticity we lent to his exhibit. A sort of still life with children.

Figure 3: Still life with children. (Bechdel 13)
Figure 4: The Bechdels and the Addams (Bechdel 34)

Figure 5: Two levels of juxtaposition. (Bechdel 35)
Figure 6: Maps are another type of key. (Bechdel 30)
Figure 7: The Wind in the Willows offers further insight into the Bechdel's (Bechdel 146)
Figure 8: The dictionary definition proves insufficient. (Bechdel 57)
Figure 9: The photograph that inspired Bechdel to write *Fun Home.* (Bechdel 100-101)
WHAT’S LOST IN TRANSLATION IS THE COMPLEXITY OF LOSS ITSELF. IN THE SAME BOX WHERE I FOUND THE PHOTO OF ROY, THERE’S ONE OF DAD AT ABOUT THE SAME AGE.

HE’S WEARING A WOMEN’S BATHING SUIT. A FRATERNITY PRANK? BUT THE POSE HE STRIKES IS NOT MINCING OR SILLY AT ALL. HE’S LISSOME, ELEGANT.

IN ANOTHER PICTURE, HE’S SUN-BATHING ON THE TARPAPER ROOF OF HIS FRAT HOUSE JUST AFTER HE TURNED TWENTY-TWO. WAS THE BOY WHO TOOK IT HIS LOVER?

AS THE GIRL WHO TOOK THIS POLAROID OF ME ON A FIRE ESCAPE ON MY TWENTY-FIRST BIRTHDAY WAS MINE?


Figure 10: Multiple levels of juxtaposition (Bechdel 120)


**Conclusion**

This dissertation has shown the ways in which the narrators of Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Marvel Moreno’s *En diciembre llegaban las brisas*, and Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* are proustian truth seekers. The concept of the truth seeker allowed this dissertation to propose a reading of each of these texts that does not separate the form from the content, but rather calls attention to the connection between the two and the way they determine each other.

The concept of the truth seeker, based in part on Gilles Deleuze’s *Proust and Signs*, describes a protagonist narrator who recounts specific parts of his or her life, particularly their entrance into adulthood and their discovery of art. Born into societies which privilege superficiality and appearance, truth seekers find themselves at odds with the world around them. This world becomes for them a series of signs which appear to contain a hidden truth. They take the form of events, places, experiences, and, most importantly, other characters. Driven by an uncontrollable desire for truth, truth seekers devote most of their narratives to repeated and, ultimately failed, attempts to break open the signs they encounter. Truth seekers want nothing more than to accurately understand and pin down the people around them and this desire guides their actions throughout their narratives as well as the form these narratives take.

In terms of form, texts that feature truth seekers follow common structural and stylistic traits which, when combined with the previously described thematic characteristics, shape the narrative and provide the critic with a lens through which these types of text can be read. Truth seeker texts have the structure of a *Kunstlerroman*. They describe the apprenticeship by which the truth seekers learn to decode the signs around them as well as their discovery of art, particularly writing, as a way to access, or at least attempt to access, hidden and absolute truth. The overall
structure of truth seeker novel mirrors its moment-to-moment structure. That is to say, the overarching form of the novel follows a pattern similar to its sentence structure. Sentences, or in the case of comics, panels and *planches*, in truth seeker novels are created around the possibility of tension and discovery. This means that these basic units of narrative structure function by offering an initial, apparent, certainty. The middle section typically involves a long, winding digression in which the narrator tests the veracity of this initial assertion. The final section reveals a contradictory, often painful, discovery that shatters the initial certainty and replaces it with a new comprehension of the sign. This form, which creates a recurring tension between beginning and ending, knowing and not knowing, is the textual embodiment of truth seeking. The particularities of this form, which may vary from one text to another, are determined by the differences in the type of desire truth seekers feel. They are always driven by desire, but exactly how this desire manifests itself in the text depends on the specific desire. This means that in order to understand truth seeking, one must understand desire as a motivating force as well as a stylistic choice. These basic characteristics of truth seekers, both thematic and formal, offer a way to read these types of texts.

Proust’s Marcel is driven by a desire to possess and pin down his subjects, the objects of his desire. In his case, the process of unmasking takes place when the narrator recalls an initial version of a character and places it next to the version he is analyzing. This stereoscopic method of juxtaposing two similar, but slightly different images, leads to the moment of discovery which shatters the initial version and replaces it with a new one, which will, in turn be destroyed later. The process is painful for Marcel, as he realizes that his desire is impossible to satisfy. Each discovery is a disappointment and prompts a discussion on the nature of knowledge and the possibility of truly achieving it. Even though Marcel recognizes that access to the truth, even
through art, is likely impossible, he nevertheless continues to attempt it and suffer disappointment every time he fails. Even in the last volume, after several painful unmaskings, he still hopes to have something close to x-ray vision that could penetrate past outward appearances and reach the hidden kernel of truth inside the sign. This means that, despite constant disappointment, Marcel believes in some possibility of truth.

On the other hand, Lina, the protagonist-narrator in Moreno's *En diciembre*, feels a completely different kind of desire from Marcel. While most men, and some women, around her continue to want in order to possess and control, Lina is driven by a combination of curiosity and guiltless desire to understand. Throughout her search, she encounters characters she cannot understand: her friends and their husbands behave in ways she finds violent, contradictory, or simply strange. She does not want to have them, or change them into a version she can comprehend. Rather, she tries to achieve a momentary feeling of identification with them, an instant of empathy with even the most violent characters the novel savagely chastises. In the end, Lina's curiosity pushes her towards artistic creation as a way to dilute the limits between herself and others, something that might allow her to truly understand them. The result, however, is ultimately disappointing. Lina is not plagued by the neuroses of a man who cannot understand his lover, but by a certain feeling of melancholy. Writing, years later and from exile, she laments the way her world changed so radically after the sexual liberation of the sixties and drug money from the seventies onwards, affected Barranquilla society. This world has changed, but in a way it has also stayed the same, so whatever understanding of it she accrued seems either outdated or current, but ignored. Unlike Marcel, Lina seems to understand and accept the impossibility of her search, but cannot help but feel disappointed by her failure.
Bechdel's Alison, on the other hand, operates in a different way. Her search for truth is also doomed to failure because in her world, as in the worlds of Proust and Moreno, there is no unified, single truth; there are only, as Deleuze would put it, signs and interpretations. The difference with Alison is that she does not appear to be distressed by this failure. Her method of truth seeking, known here as intertextual key swapping, consists of a series of tentative motions in which the narrator puts forth a comparison between the object of her desire, her father, and an intertextual reference taken from literature, history of philosophy. The result of this juxtaposition of texts is a possible reading of her father, a likely, but imperfect, attempt at understanding the truth he is hiding. What is most interesting about Alison is that, as each key she tries out proves incomplete or ineffective, she quickly abandons them without looking back. There is no sudden, disappointing unmasking in Fun Home, only an ever-growing collection of flawed masks. Each new one neither destroys nor replaces the previous versions, it simply adds to them regardless of mounting contradictions. The result is a non-hierarchical collection of surfaces without the pretense of a hidden truth that lies beneath. Unlike Marcel or Lina, Alison appears to be content in the knowledge that truth, or identity, are impossible and that accumulation, instead of penetration, is the end result of the search for truth.

The impact of this dissertation will therefore lie in its proposal of a concept that can be applied to texts, strictly literary or otherwise, in such a way that it will allow critics to question the connection between form and content and the ways they interact and determine each other. The definition of the proustian truth seeker as a stylistic and thematic engine of narration can shed light unto texts that are structured like Kunstlerromane, have styles that depend on tension and discovery or feature protagonist-narrators with the characteristics described above. On the other hand, this study has also proposed a different way to trace and understand a writer's influence over
other writers in terms that are neither hierarchical nor agonistic. By placing writers on an even field and not in ladder in which one assumes one comes first and others follow, one a can use more recent texts to enhance the reading of previous ones and trace the way themes and stylistic conceits change in different time periods, languages and cultures.

In literature, texts that could benefit from an analysis based on truth seekers include the works of Elena Ferrante or Henry James’ “The Figure in the Carpet”. In Ferrante, particularly her so-called Neapolitan tetralogy, but also her three early novels, could be read, at least in part, in this proustian key. In the Neapolitan tetralogy, the narrator’s desire to tell her story, which is really the story of her relationship with her childhood friend Lila, is what determines the novels' form. Elena, the narrator and protagonist, is determined to comprehend the full extent of her relationship with her friend, which is often convoluted, capricious and at times contradictory. This becomes evident in the prologue of the first book, which begins with an adult Lila disappearing without a trace. Even though they have grown apart over the years, the event has a profound impact on Elena, who, as soon as she hears the news, starts to write. The prologue ends with a promise of sorts, made to herself but also the reader, to dig as deeply as she can and unearth all the pieces that make up her relationship to her friend. The presumably autobiographic nature of the work, as well as the fact that, like other truth seekers, Elena eventually channels her curiosity into a career as a novelist further cement the proustian connection. Ferrante’s style, however, does not fit the truth seeker model perfectly. Her sentences are short, almost curt, and display little tension between knowing and not knowing, an essential feature of the truth seeker text. While the overall form of the novels revolves around Elena’s desire to understand her friend, a desire that is closer to Marcel’s than it is to Lina or Alison’s, sentence structure does not conform to the proustian model. This is true of Ferrante’s earlier works. In her first three novels, *L’amore molesto* (1992), *I giorni dell’abbandono*
(2002), and La figlia oscura (2006), first-person narrators describe their processes of discovery of another character’s hidden truth. Their searches also fail and are punctuated by disappointment, even if the style is not explicitly proustian. Nevertheless, a reading of Ferrante’s work in these terms might offer some insight into the nature of these narrations as well as the limits of the concept of the truth seeker.

Furthermore, Henry James’ 1896 novella “The Figure in the Carpet” could also be an example of a truth seeker text. A nameless, first-person narrator firmly believes he can decipher the hidden secret at the center of his favorite author’s work. He is driven by the same desire to break open a specific sign because he believes it, the figure in the carpet, contains some hidden truth which, once revealed, can change his understanding of the author’s work. Again, the figure of the truth seeker can only be partially applied. While James’ style does allow for a certain meandering and collecting of evidence between the start of the sentence and its end, thanks in part to James’ use of the semicolon and the parenthesis, the novella does not have the structure of a Kunstlerroman even though it is concerned with the nature of literature and reading.

On the other hand, in comics, David B.’s comic memoir L’Ascencion du Haut Mal (1996-2003) fits the truth seeker mold almost perfectly. The book chronicle’s David’s discovery of drawing and comics narration as a way to understand his brother whose epilepsy confuses and fascinates David. The narration follows the family’s fruitless attempts to cure epilepsy in a parade of doctors, gurus, and charlatans. As the brother loses control of himself and becomes unrecognizable, David finds refuge in his art, which becomes increasingly complex and chaotic as he both understands and fears the disease more. David’s search manifests itself in the planche as well in all the typical comic forms, but also in an additional tension between the realistic images
of the autobiographical narration and the grotesque, monstrous, and allegorical figures that make up David’s understanding of epilepsy.

Finally, in film, Agnès Varda’s *Les plages d’Agnès* (2008) could benefit from the type of reading proposed here. It is a mostly chronological, mostly autobiographical collection of anecdotes and dramatizations about her life. Her interest, though, as she confesses in the opening scenes, is in other people. The film is made up of a collage of film techniques, first-person narration and reflections on memory and the ways in which film can and cannot capture it. In a certain sense, it follows the model of truth seeking perfectly, if only in reverse as it explores not a young woman’s discovery of her craft but rather an old woman’s understanding of its possibilities.
Works Cited


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