

CHAPTER FIVE

Romantic selfhood in the comics of Alan Moore

Writers of alternative comics are characteristically an eccentric bunch, members of a culture that sets itself apart from producers and consumers of mainstream comics and other media. Nevertheless, Alan Moore is often considered to be weirder than most. Even before he declared himself to be a magician and worshipper of the Roman snake-god Glycon, his physical appearance, outspoken views and unorthodox, sometimes volatile relationships made him the subject of a reasonable amount of gossip in the comics world.¹ This eccentricity is important because it is impossible to separate Moore's representations of selfhood from his unorthodox beliefs about human perception, history, magic and contemporary culture.

Moore has been nothing if not prolific, and the bibliography provided by the Alan Moore Fansite lists several hundred titles.² What I am seeking to demonstrate here is that Moore's later works, particularly *From Hell* (1991-6, collected 1999), *The Birth Caul* (1995) and *Lost Girls* (1991-2006) are the products of a neo-Romantic sensibility which developed in parallel with his identity as a magician. I will begin with a brief examination of an earlier comic, *Swamp Thing*, in which traces of his later preoccupations can be seen, but which differs in several significant ways from his 1990s work. I will then discuss those comics written during and after Moore's magical "mid-life crisis" (as he put it),³ as it is in these works that Moore most clearly privileges the visionary and the non-rational, and attempts to describe a lost, intuitive, spontaneous selfhood uncontained by social convention. He also places increasing emphasis on the importance of individual experience, and particularly spiritual experience unmediated by religious authorities. At the same time, all three of these comics are powerfully aware of social class and the ways in which physical and historical factors determine personal identity. I wish to trace the development of these views and to discuss the central role of perception in Moore's vision of human

1 Arguably the best place for comics community gossip is *The Comics Journal* message board. <<http://www.tcj.com/messboard/>>

2 Stephen Camper, "Bibliography". *Alan Moore Fan Site* <<http://www.alanmoorefansite.com/bibliography.html>>

3 Tasha Robinson, interview with Alan Moore. *The Onion A.V. Club*. 24th October 2001. <<http://www.avclub.com/content/node/24222>>

identity.

Before I address Moore's comics I will give a brief outline of his early work and the cultural scene in which he was writing. By the time Moore began writing at the end of the 1970s, comics in Britain had been in decline for some time.⁴ Children's comics and action and adventure titles were still in print but their circulation had dwindled, partly due to the growing dominance of television. Imported US titles were popular, and as Huxley's study demonstrates, there was an indigenous underground scene buoyed up by punk culture in the late 70s, but nevertheless, the industry was hardly thriving. Strongly influenced by this underground culture, Moore started writing comics in 1979, initially with the intention of both writing and drawing his stories.⁵ He had no art school or literary training, and had in fact been expelled from school for dealing LSD. He began by writing small strips in various alternative music magazines and the local *Northants Post*, including the bizarre and decidedly countercultural *Maxwell the Magic Cat* (1979-86, collected 1986-7). From these he progressed to writing scripts for *2000AD* and a variety of Marvel UK titles, both pre-established series such as *Doctor Who* and his own early series *The Ballad of Halo Jones* (1984-6) and *Skizz* (1983). He also wrote for Dez Skinn's anthology *Warrior*, in which Moore's *V for Vendetta* was first published between 1982 and '85.⁶ All of these comics were primarily science fiction and action-based, but as Sabin points out, *2000AD* "exhibited a definite punk edge" with its anti-authoritarian stance and taste for violence.⁷ Like Sim's *Cerebus*, Moore's early work existed at a confluence of the mainstream and the underground, consisting of sci-fi, fantasy and adventure stories with a strong alternative flavour. The comics I will discuss here are amongst Moore's more literary works, but it is worth remembering that his roots are firmly in a popular, superhero tradition, and indeed his most recent works for his own imprint ABC ("America's Best Comics") show a decisive return to superhero narratives.

Moore has said that at the age of seven his career plan was to "put on a costume and fight crime".⁸ One might expect a writer from a tradition as overtly

4 Sabin (1996), 131.

5 Moore has discussed his debt to the underground in numerous interviews. See, for example, Strangers in a Tangled Wilderness, "Authors on Anarchism: An Interview with Alan Moore". *Infoshop News*. August 17th, 2007.

<<http://news.infoshop.org/article.php?story=2007alan-moore-interview>>

6 For basic biographical information and a fuller publication history see Lance Parkin, *The Pocket Essential Alan Moore* (Harpenden: Pocket Essentials, 2001).

7 Sabin (1996) 134.

8 Lee (2005).

masculinist as superhero comics to share Sim and Crumb's anxieties about the declining dominance of white masculinity, or at least to relate the concept of the superhero to his own identity struggles. However, Moore has never been particularly hung up about male power, and has expressed overtly feminist views both in his comics and in interviews.⁹ Nor is he ever really talking about himself in his comics, notwithstanding his brief appearance in *The Birth Caul*: Moore's authorial voice is certainly insistent and frequently didactic, but it is rarely autobiographical. His concern with subjectivity derives from a belief that human perceptions are totally unreliable indicators of reality, and this view is coupled with a belief in imagination as quite literally a magical force. In his published correspondence with Dave Sim he wrote:

The simple fact of things is that we can never directly perceive any such phenomenon as this putative "reality": all we can ever perceive is *our own perceptions*, with these perceptions assembled into a constantly updated mosaic of apprehensions (or misapprehensions) that we call reality.¹⁰

This view is intrinsic to many of Moore's narratives: in the comics I will discuss here he examines the visionary states experienced by a serial killer, the pre-linguistic perceptions of young children and the sexual fantasies of adults. Moreover, it is a view well suited to the comic book form for several reasons. Firstly, the argument that the world is not as most people perceive it is one that lends itself to science fiction and fantasy, which had become dominant modes in both British and US comics by the time Moore began writing.¹¹ Secondly, the comics medium itself presents its narratives as a "mosaic of apprehensions" which never aspire to represent reality with any precision. But thirdly, as I have already shown, the authors of independent comics typically have a high degree of autonomy and freedom from editorial constraints, and are therefore at liberty to explore all manner of unorthodox opinions in their work.

Whilst auteur theory has largely been discredited when it comes to film

9 See, for example, "The Curse" (*Swamp Thing* Vol.3, ch.6), an outright critique of patriarchy and domestic bullying; and Lee (1995), in which Moore condemns the eroticisation of violence against women.

10 Smoky man [sic] and Millidge, eds, *Alan Moore: Portrait of an Extraordinary Gentleman* (2003) 308.

11 I am thinking in the most general terms here: Mila Bongco, for example, places both Moore and Sim in a post-superhero tradition. Mila Bongco, *Reading Comics: Language, Culture and the Concept of the Superhero in Comic Books* (New York and London: Garland, 2000).

analysis,¹² it still holds a good deal of power amongst independent comics writers who are characteristically proud of their resistance to being told what to do. Authors like Crumb, Sim, Barry and Doucet have almost no external editorial input, even on the basic level of spell-checking. Moore likewise is adamant that the creative process is his alone, and argues that this control over the narrative is one of the major advantages that the comics form has over film:

...in one of my comic scripts, if there is a full stop at the end of a sentence, that full stop will be there in the finished comic, unless something has gone wildly wrong. In movies, I accept that there's no one person who has that control... In my world, the actors and the director are all made of paper, and they do exactly what I say.¹³

There may be some truth in this but it comes with a caveat: Moore does not illustrate his own scripts, and in spite of the unusual level of detail he prescribes to his collaborators, the artists inevitably have a significant input.¹⁴ This chapter is not, therefore, only about Alan Moore but also about his collaborators, particularly Eddie Campbell and Melinda Gebbie, whose distinctive work plays a central role in interpretation of *From Hell*, *The Birth Caul* and *Lost Girls*.

I want to begin with a brief sketch of *Swamp Thing* because whilst it is clear that Moore's neo-Romanticism was most clearly defined in *From Hell* and subsequent works, some of his ideas had been developing over a longer period. Where *From Hell* and *Lost Girls* are both historical narratives that take place around the turn of the twentieth century, *Swamp Thing* is a work of science fiction, set in an alternative present. Importantly, it is also set in the DC universe – that is, the narrative takes place in a world in which Batman, Superman, Wonder Woman and other DC heroes also exist, and no DC author may write something that undermines the plot of another title. All stories are part of a larger, continuous whole which hardly anyone has read in its entirety: few readers catch a story at the very beginning, or follow it right to the end (even an irrevocably dead character can always be revived by a flashback sequence). With *Swamp Thing*, then, Moore was working within very tightly defined parameters and it is a mark of the author's

12 See John Caughie, ed. *Theories of Authorship: A Reader* (London: Routledge/ BFI, 1981).

13 Robinson (2001).

14 For an example of Moore's comics scripts, see Alan Moore, *From Hell: The Complete Scripts Volume 1* (1995). See also Steve Bissette, "Mr Moore and Me", in smoky man [sic] and Gary Spencer Millidge, eds, *Alan Moore: Portrait of an Extraordinary Gentleman* (Leigh on Sea: Abiogenesis Press, 2003) 219.

singular ingenuity that he managed to change the title as much as he did.

When Moore took over the second series of *Swamp Thing* in 1983, the comic's sales were in decline and its editors at DC were thinking of cancelling it altogether. *Swamp Thing* had been created by Len Wein in 1971, and told the story of a scientist, Alec Holland (Alex Olson in the earliest version), who mutated into a vegetable-humanoid monster after a chemical explosion. Moore accepted the job on the understanding that he would be free to rework the title in whatever way he saw fit. He was a relatively unknown writer at the time, but DC did not have much to lose.¹⁵ What Moore did was to rewrite the back story, claiming that the Swamp Thing was not a mutated version of Alec Holland but a sort of sentient plant that had modelled itself on Holland, who had indeed died in the original explosion. In "The Anatomy Lesson" (the second issue scripted by Moore), Jason Woodrue explains what happened when the explosion blew Holland's body into the swamp:

His body goes into the swamp along with the formula that it is saturated with. And once there, it decomposes... [The plants in the swamp] eat him... and they become infected by a powerful consciousness that does not realise it is no longer alive! Imagine that cloudy, confused intelligence, possibly with only the vaguest notion of self, trying to make sense of its new environment... gradually shaping the plant cells that it now inhabits into a shape that it's more comfortable with. (Vol.1, 23)

This revelation prompts something of an identity crisis in Swamp Thing, who, having shared all Holland's memories, had always believed that he was Alec Holland, and had been hoping for a cure that would return him to human form. Woodrue calls him "a ghost dressed in weeds" (Vol 1, 33) and "the moss-encrusted echo of a man" (Vol 1, 40). Moore also saw the funny side, likening the old Swamp Thing to "Hamlet covered in snot".¹⁶ However, their disparaging assessments do not remain true for very long. Gradually abandoning his attachment to his old, human identity, Swamp Thing becomes accustomed to his new, plant self, and finds that he is able to sustain a psychic connection with the plant world, "the green". In a double page at the beginning of chapter three, Swamp Thing's thoughts appear as an interior monologue (Figure 36):

15 Lance Parkin, *Alan Moore* (Harpenden: Pocket Essentials, 2001). A detailed publication history of *Swamp Thing* can be found on Wikipedia. "Swamp Thing". *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*. 17 September 2007. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swamp_Thing>

16 Lee (2005).



Figure 36.

Somewhere quiet... somewhere green and timeless... I drift... the cellular landscape stretching beneath me... eerie... silent... beautiful... My awareness... expanding out through the forgotten root systems... (Vol.1, 61)¹⁷

The page layout reflects this free-floating plant consciousness: patterns of cells, striated plant tissue and meandering roots entwine amongst panels that overlap and drift out of alignment in multiple shades of green. The still-humanoid body of Swamp Thing appears suspended in a vast green space as the character learns to inhabit a new mode of consciousness. What is noteworthy about *Swamp Thing* is the notion that the main character's consciousness is transferable, that it can be shared, moved or can lie dormant for long periods. He is a hybrid, a unique entity, a member of the plant kingdom that has acquired many human attributes and is capable of relationships with humans. Much of the narrative of Moore's run on *Swamp Thing* concerns the protagonist's efforts to strike a balance between his plant self (and related environmental concerns) and his relationship with a human woman, Abby Cable.

¹⁷ The ellipses are Moore's: Swamp Thing's speech is always punctuated with them, presumably to indicate that he speaks very slowly.

Science fiction in general has always been concerned with subjectivity, from the plaintive introspection of Frankenstein to *Star Trek's* Borg collective. Far from transporting readers to other worlds, sci-fi offers an oblique perspective on the problems of human subjectivity here and now. Jenny Wolmark used Stuart Hall's idea of the "becoming" subject when she wrote of feminist science fiction:

An open-ended sense of identity, and the capacity for it to be constructed and reconstructed in time and history, allows for the creative destabilization of definitions of self and other and for the acknowledgement of difference.¹⁸

Indeed, Swamp Thing thinks of his own identity in terms of "becoming":

I am learning... so much... about what I am... and the knowledge... is gradually... changing me... But what is it changing... me into? What... am I... becoming? I bide my time... in this place... until I am grown... And I consider... this organism... that I am. Sometimes... I am in awe... at its strangeness... and complexity... Sometimes... I am almost frightened... by my own possibilities. (Vol.3, 62)

Swamp Thing is in a state of flux between human and plant, unable and unwilling to shake off his human memories but gradually acquiring the habits of the green. He is post-human, his existence radically conditioned by historical forces and scientific intervention. Like the cyborg of Donna Haraway's 1985 "Cyborg Manifesto", he is a chimera, a creature of multiple origin stories, none of them quite conclusive or immune to rewriting. For Haraway, the boundaries between animal and human, human and machine, physical and non-physical have long been breached, and the cyborg is a politically radical figure existing outside old dualisms. The cyborg, she says, offers new possibilities for socialist feminism by celebrating irony, multiplicity and the end of wholeness. Above all, Haraway's cyborg is beyond the dualism of gender, and Swamp Thing likewise transcends the fixed gender role – the masculine emphasis on *action* – suggested by his superheroic identity.¹⁹

On the one hand, I am suggesting, Swamp Thing is a decisively postmodern figure, a hybrid who eventually comes to terms with his post-human identity. Yet at the same time, many of the concerns that surround his existence – human relationships with the natural world, the place of individual heroism, and the need

18 Jenny Wolmark, "Time and Identity in Feminist Science Fiction", in David Seed, ed. *A Companion to Science Fiction* (2005) 161.

19 Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto", in Neil Badmington, ed. *Posthumanism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000).

for more intuitive, non-rational modes of perception – are the products of a much older set of ideas, specifically the Romanticism of the early nineteenth century. In retrospect, *Swamp Thing* bears the traces of an interest in selfhood and perceptual experience that would become increasingly important in Moore's later, independent work. The necessity of abandoning preconceptions of an identity based on civilised norms and returning to a natural, intuitive state of selfhood are themes which the author would approach from a number of different directions throughout the 1990s.

From Hell was not only written at a point of personal change for Moore, but was itself instrumental in his decision to become a magician. In a 2006 interview with Eddie Campbell, he described this vast and complex fictionalisation of the Jack the Ripper murders as "a way station approximately on the borderline between my life before magic and my life after."²⁰ I will first give a brief description of the form and style of *From Hell*, and will then relate these elements to the book's plot and ideology, which, I argue, have stronger connections with Moore's personal world view than is generally acknowledged.

Moore and Campbell's historical comic *From Hell* was originally published in Steve Bissette's horror anthology *Taboo* between 1991 and '92, and subsequently by Tundra and Kitchen Sink Press until 1996. In this book Moore explores the premise that the Ripper murders were committed by Sir William Gull as part of an elaborate psychogeographic ritual, and that they marked the birth of twentieth-century culture. The comic is a sort of cultural scavenger, taking in the figure of the flâneur, late-nineteenth-century philosophies of history and time, and the beginnings of modern tabloid journalism, not to mention a number of guest appearances by late-nineteenth-century celebrities. In Moore's view, the comic book medium (which, in terms of its first widespread newspaper publication, can be traced to around this period) is linked to the birth of modernity, and therefore *From Hell's* interest in the problematic nature of modern selfhood is inextricable from the form of the comic itself.

From Hell makes a great show of its own textuality, and it is clear from the outset that an interest in paper, in reading and writing practices and their attendant tangles of signification forms an integral part of the project. *From Hell* is one of

20 Interview with Eddie Campbell in *A Disease of Language* (London: Knockabout/ Palmano Bennett, 2005) N. pag.

the few comics to carry footnotes, and each chapter has several, usually lengthy epigraphs. Moore as researcher is led down infinite paths in an endlessly complex plot, faced with a bewildering proliferation of texts and stories. His attempts at explaining his choices to the reader invariably raise as many questions as they answer. On the one hand, Moore attempts some measure of historical veracity, imitating Victorian dialogue with varying levels of success and researching London's history in meticulous detail; at the same time he acknowledges the impossibility of any kind of absolute truth and is constantly drawing attention to the slipperiness of his material. The epigraph at the beginning of chapter 13 underlines the point:

Whatever is almost true is quite false, and among the most dangerous of errors, because being so near truth, it is the more likely to lead astray.

Henry Ward Beecher (1813 – 1887)²¹

As well as helping to clarify or (more often) obfuscate the plot, the footnotes draw attention to the physical textuality of the comic: it moves towards hypertext, offering numerous reading possibilities and pointing towards an endless trail of other texts, sources and references. It also has the side-effect of making the text impossible to translate directly to film, and most critics agree that the film version of *From Hell* (Hughes dir. 2001), starring Johnny Depp and Heather Graham, is somewhat disappointing.²²

Eddie Campbell's work makes an invaluable contribution to *From Hell* because the distinctiveness of his style makes the drawings themselves a central part of the narrative. Far from a cartoon stereotype, Campbell's illustrations for *From Hell* were influenced by both 1890s illustration and early-twentieth-century traditions of newspaper cartooning (see Figures 37-8). They are dark and often chaotic, their surface crowded with a mesh of scratchy lines reminiscent of an etching. Significantly for a horror comic featuring extended scenes of murder and mutilation, they contain no colour. Moore has criticised the "pornographic" and "cliché[d]"²³ nature of many Jack the Ripper narratives, and went to great lengths

21 The chapters of *From Hell* have non-continuous pagination. The epigraphs in each chapter appear on an unnumbered page facing page 1.

22 *The Internet Movie Database* has an archive of reviews from 180 sources. <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0120681/externalreviews>>

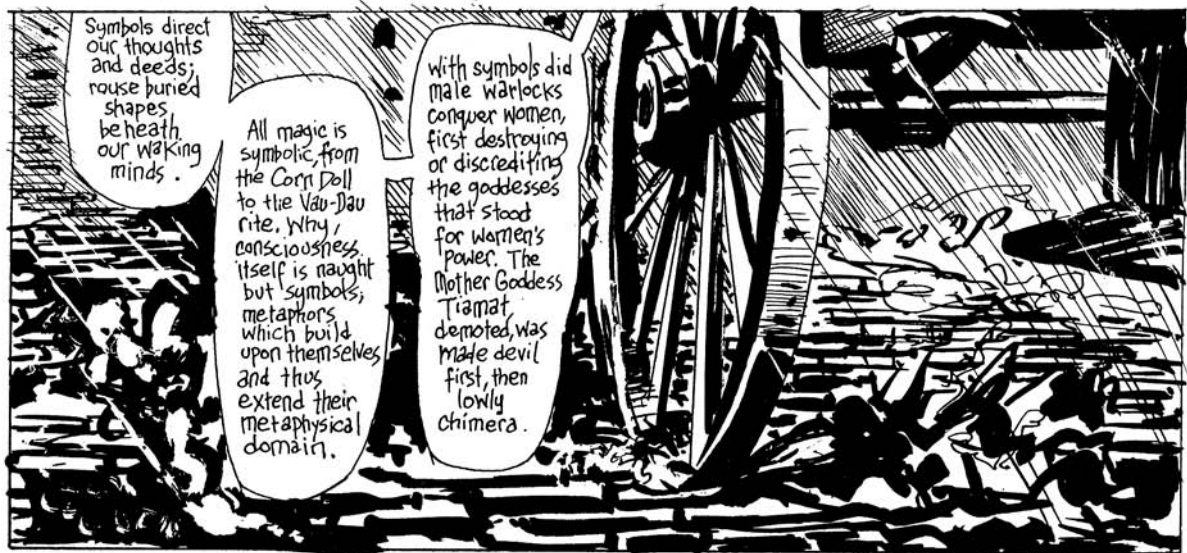
23 Saxon Bullock, "The House that Jack Built". Interview with Alan Moore. *Saxon Bullock* personal website. October 2002. <<http://www.saxonbullock.com/alanmooreint.htm>>

to avoid charges of voyeurism in *From Hell*. Campbell's drawings never eroticise the women in the novel, or glamorise prostitution: indeed, in their attention to the poverty and squalor of nineteenth-century Whitechapel the drawings are often reminiscent of Gustave Doré's illustrations of Victorian London, although thankfully without Doré's occasional sentimentality. Moreover, in its monochrome depiction of the hardship of urban life, *From Hell* is a direct descendant of Frans Masereel's woodcut narratives such as *The City* (1925) and *Passionate Journey* (1919). Campbell's real strength is architecture: his drawings of London are stunning, those of people comparatively flat. I suspect that this is as much a reflection of Campbell's abilities and interests as it is a carefully calculated technique, but the effect is to privilege the city over the people, matching Gull's distorted perspective with this bizarre artistic vision. At times, Campbell's drawings appear to suggest that the significance of individuals is slipping away as broader patterns of history and geography begin to take hold. I wish to look a little more closely at how this works, and to consider its implications.

Through both script and image, *From Hell* frequently signals a powerful connection between individuals and their environment, between body, city and text. At its simplest level this seems fairly obvious: the women in *From Hell* are inseparable from their environment, and even Abberline eventually stereotypes "East End women" as untrustworthy (Ch.11, 25), whilst Gull's social position and West End address put him in a position of intellectual command over the whole of London. However, the parallels between body, text and landscape are often more subtle: Netley claims to know London "like the back of my hand" (Ch.4, 6), whilst Moore, in his letters to Dave Sim, describes Marie Kelly's body as a text, saying "The scalpel interrupts the normal linear continuity of things, allows new possibilities."²⁴ In the same correspondence, Moore also describes the process of sorting through research materials in specifically geographical terms: "Rivers of theory. High points of conjecture and ley-lines of association."²⁵ *From Hell* not only emphasises its physical textuality; it also draws attention to the ink on its pages by playing with parallels between ink and blood, writing and violence. On the most literal level, splashes of ink represent splashes of blood. (One might recall Dave Sim's use of a very similar trick in *Cerebus* (Figure 13d).) Gull spells out the parallels

24 Smoky man and Millidge, eds. (2003) 323.

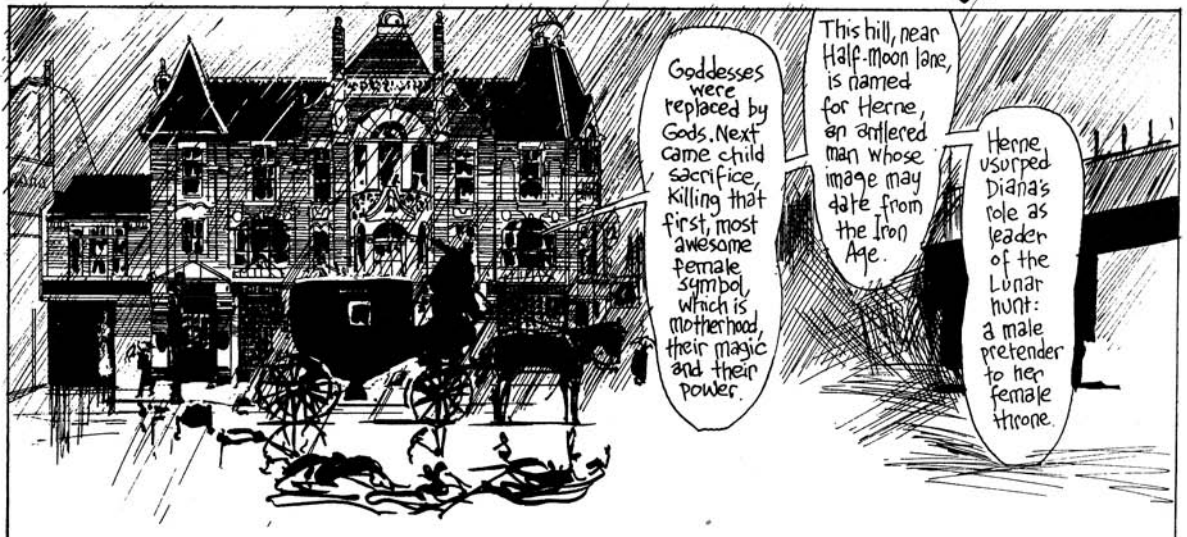
25 Smoky man and Millidge, eds. (2003) 310.



Symbols direct our thoughts and deeds; rouse buried shapes beneath our waking minds.

All magic is symbolic, from the Corn Doll to the Vau-Dau rite. Why, consciousness itself is naught but symbols; metaphors which build upon themselves, and thus extend their metaphysical domain.

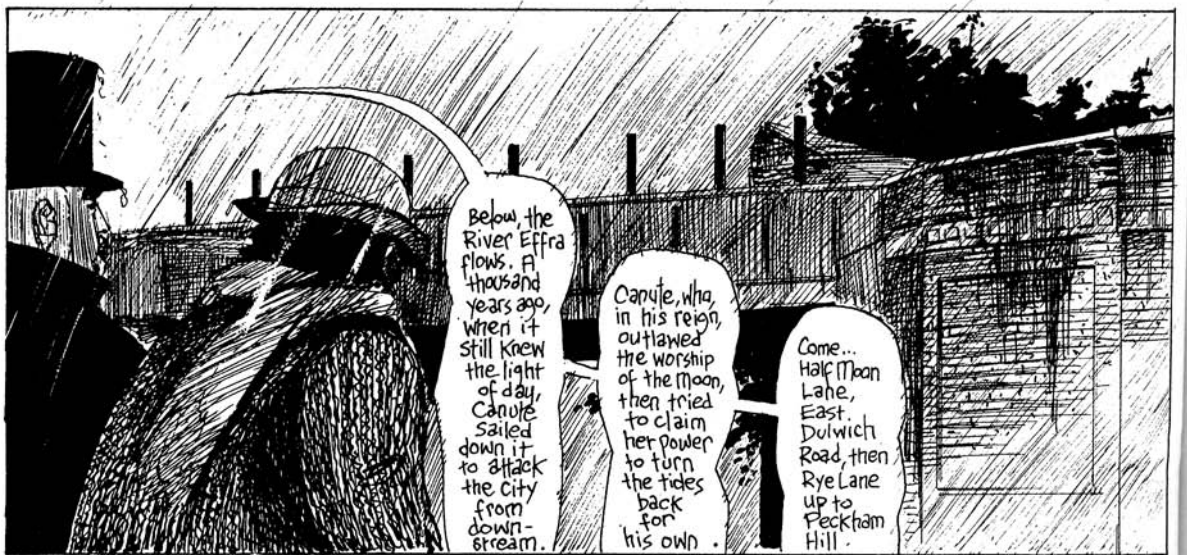
With symbols did male warlocks conquer women, first destroying or discrediting the goddesses that stood for women's power. The Mother Goddess Triam, demoted, was made devil first, then lowly chimera.



Goddesses were replaced by Gods. Next came child sacrifice, killing that first, most awesome female symbol, which is motherhood, their magic and their power.

This hill, near Half-Moon Lane, is named for Herne, an antlered man whose image may date from the Iron Age.

Herne, usurped Diana's role as leader of the Lunar hunt: a male pretender to her female throne.



Below, the River Effra flows. A thousand years ago, when it still knew the light of day, Canute sailed down it to attack the city from downstream.

Canute, who, in his reign, outlawed the worship of the Moon, then tried to claim her power to turn the tides back for his own.

Come... Half Moon Lane, East. Dulwich Road, then Rye Lane up to Peckham Hill.

Figure 37.

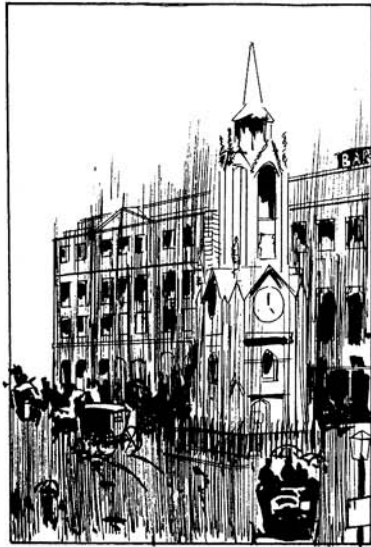


Figure 38.

from time to time: when he assumes the form of a seagull, for example (a recurring pun), he explodes to rain blood on Mediterranean sailors, saying “I sign my year of panics with appalling miracle” (Ch.14, 6). All this can be read in a number of ways. Firstly, Moore acknowledges the parallels between Gull’s project and his own: Gull’s assumption of power through the ritualistic dissection of bodies is mirrored by the writer’s mastery of textual material and the distribution of ink on paper. Secondly, the slippage between body, city and text suggests that formerly safe hierarchies of value defining man’s place in the world no longer stand, and meanings are to be found in the apparently random and chaotic urban environment and its inhabitants. But finally, I would submit, the text is trying to say something about its own medium: if text and body can merge then so can word and image. The collapse of boundaries between human constructs invites a similar collapse between those formerly segregated arenas of representation, the “sister arts”.

In writing *From Hell* Moore was strongly influenced by the writings of Iain Sinclair. Sinclair’s *Lud Heat* (1975), a strange mixture of prose, poetry, hieroglyphics, maps and various kinds of illustration, has much in common with the esoteric textual concerns of Moore’s comic, and more importantly, provided the basis for Gull’s explanation of London’s Hawksmoor churches (Appendix 1, 3). Moore’s interest in the possibility of a landscape exerting an unconscious influence on the lives of its inhabitants is most conspicuous in chapter 4, in which Gull gives his new-found accomplice, Netley, a tour of the city (Figures 37 and 38). Gull proclaims:

We’ll penetrate its metaphors, lay bare its structure and thus come at last upon its meaning... The greater part of London’s story is not writ in words. It is instead a literature of stone, of place-names and associations... where faint echoes answer back from off the distant ruined walls of bloody history. (Ch.4, 9)

Gull’s lengthy discourse on London as “symbol, history and myth” (Ch.4, 6), taking in an intensely misogynistic history of gender relations, is confusingly esoteric and ultimately overwhelming. As a participant in Gull’s guided tour, any slightly inattentive reader is led to side with the illiterate, terrified Netley, who ends up vomiting in fear on the final page. Moore has said that magic is all about language:²⁶ here, black magic arises from a frightening surfeit of signification as Gull claims an ability to read meanings into every detail of the landscape. It is important that

26 Bill Baker, *Alan Moore Spells it Out* (Milford, CT: Airwave, 2005) 9.

we, as readers, are in danger of feeling as confused as Netley. Chapter 4 shows Gull forming and justifying his plans in the wake of instructions from Queen Victoria to murder the women who are indirectly blackmailing Prince Eddy. However, these plans are not so much explained as circled around with flourishes of bewildering arcana. It is a chapter in which the reader is supposed to feel a little lost, and this effect is achieved partly through a tension between word and image. The pictorial sequence shows a fairly straightforward trip around London, whilst the dialogue – in fact, predominantly Gull’s monologue – is in a world of its own. The interaction of word and image and the obscurity and abstraction of architectural form conspire to lead the reader out of her depth. Gull’s discourse, in strings of linked word balloons, leads the eye around the architectural drawings in mimicry of the guided tour itself, often making a significant contribution to the structure and composition of the page. When it rains the marks on the page become a tangle of blotches that begin to resemble calligraphy (Figure 37). Crowds of people dissolve into shaky swirls of ink: the figures on the bridge at the top right of Figure 38 are described in abstract strokes very similar to those marks depicting the mud in Figure 37. This slippage between symbol and image points towards the synaesthetic effects of hallucinatory experience, which becomes more prevalent in Gull’s subsequent visions. Here, Gull attributes Netley’s feeling of sickness to the fact that the language of architecture “speaks direct to our unconscious mind” (Ch.4, 23). Gull’s remark identifies an erosion of the boundaries between senses and interpretative structures which Campbell mirrors with his calligraphic drawings.

Perhaps more importantly, however, his statement also taps into various twentieth-century psychoanalytic ideas on the matter of abstract form and the unconscious. Freud claimed that the unconscious mind deals in images, and employed the same methods in interpreting art that he used to decode symptoms and dreams in his patients.²⁷ However, Freud had little time for abstract form, and tended to view paintings as texts to be decoded for their symbolic content. As Jack Spector points out:

Freud ignored abstract art, not only because he demanded art... with a content capable of interpretation by a hermeneutic approach along the lines of psychoanalysis, but because he never appreciated the “musically expressive”

27 See, for example Sigmund Freud, “Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood” (1910), *Standard Edition* 11 (1953-74) 57-137.

qualities of nonmimetic, abstract art.²⁸

Subsequent critics have engaged more fully with abstraction in art: Anton Ehrenzweig, for example, argued that the unconscious has a structure similar to music or visual art, and that its “inarticulate form” is comparable to that of abstract painting or architecture.²⁹ The Abstract Expressionists were not the first to introduce abstract elements to painting, but by abandoning representation altogether, they made the clearest statement in defence of the formal language of visual art. Having internalised a number of Romantic ideals, they spoke of their paintings as spontaneous expressions of the imaginative self, which they associated with the Romantic Sublime, a quasi-spiritual state beyond the reach of language.³⁰ For this reason their paintings are often resistant to critical interpretation. Eddie Campbell’s drawings owe a great deal to Abstract Expressionism because that movement established a formal language independent of illusionist imagery and suggested that this, rather than a vocabulary of symbols, is the language of the unconscious.

Gull similarly asserts that architectural form and geographical space speak the language of the unconscious, but draws the somewhat disconcerting conclusion that they exert a real, invisible effect on the present without our knowledge. Several characters allude to a vague sense of a larger structure at work: Marie says “it was like things had a pattern I couldn’t quite see” (Ch.9, 48). These ideas disrupt the reader’s hope of a clear understanding of events: linear history, straightforward causality and enlightenment logic are dislodged by an altogether hazier and more troubling web of connections. Gull’s intuitive perception of connections in London’s history and geography is most clearly demonstrated through his visions.³¹ There are several sections of *From Hell* that might be described as narratives of visionary experience, from Gull’s vision of the goat-headed deity which he addresses as Jahbulon (Ch. 2, 27) to the moments preceding his own death in chapter 14. Chapter

28 Jack Spector, *The Aesthetics of Freud: A Study in Psychoanalysis and Art* (London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1972). See also Stephen Newton, *Painting, Psychoanalysis and Spirituality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

29 Anton Ehrenzweig, *The Hidden Order of Art* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1967)

30 See David and Cecile Shapiro, eds. *Abstract Expressionism: A Critical Record* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Ellen G. Landau, ed. *Reading Abstract Expressionism: Context and Critique* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005); Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993).

31 See Coppin (1993) for an analysis of the transition in Gull’s perception from the physical to the supernatural world.

14 of *From Hell* takes place in 1896, when Gull is in St. Mary's Asylum in Islington under the name Tom Mason. While a nurse and an orderly have sex in his cell, Gull finds himself back in a canal boat of his childhood. This marks the start of a visionary journey that takes him over the Mediterranean in 1888, over London and into William Blake's house where he appears to Blake as a reptilian monster, backwards and forwards in time, appearing as visions or dreams to Peter Sutcliffe, Ian Brady, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Gull's own former driver, Netley.

This chapter is particularly worthy of attention because it exemplifies *From Hell's* non-linear conception of time. In chapter 14 Gull revisits a conversation he once had with James Hinton, who refers to the theories suggested by his son Howard. He explains, "They suggest Time is a human illusion... that all times CO-EXIST in the stupendous whole of eternity" (Ch.14, 12; Moore's ellipsis). In addition to the more mundane perceptual experiences of disrupted chronology in *From Hell* – a drunk woman with gaps in her memory, or an unreliable witness who claims to have seen Marie Kelly after the time of her death – Moore narrates several episodes in which Gull experiences quite spectacular visions of atemporality. Both at the beginning of chapter 2 and during Gull's vision prior to his death there occurs a sequence in which different voices heard in the dark throughout Gull's life are merged into a single experience. Only the white speech balloons interrupt the black panels: without visual reference as an anchor, Gull's mind skips freely between time periods. The sequence is ostensibly set in Gull's childhood, as he travels through a darkened canal cut, and the future "memories" he hears lead him to make prophetic statements about his adult career: "I dreamed I was a grown-up man. I dreamed that I was famous for my use of knives." (Ch.14, 5) In his vision shortly before his death, Gull travels between historical periods, witnessing, amongst other things, a scene in a late-twentieth-century office. He criticises the apathy of the figures he sees:

Whence comes this dullness in your eyes? How has your century numbed you so? Shall man be given marvels only when he is beyond all wonder? With all your shimmering numbers and your lights, think not to be inured to history. Its black root succours you. It is INSIDE you. Are you asleep to it, that you cannot feel its breath upon your neck, nor see what soaks its cuffs? (Ch.10, 21)

The image of Gull as a spectral advocate of history in its darkest, most patriarchal form is a distinctly creepy one because he is ultimately addressing not just the late modern figures within his vision but the readers themselves. The comic's non-linear

structure mirrors the modern conception of historical time, but it is the postmodern abandonment of historical meaning that Gull is challenging: as he tells it, for all the apparent chaos, there is a pattern if only we could see it. Most importantly, Gull's argument is supported by the comics form itself. Because comics represent the passage of time through the spatial juxtaposition of isolated moments, their presentation of time is indeed fractured. Moreover, as Scott McCloud pointed out, these "moments" remain on the page for the reader to experience at will, with the result that "[b]oth past and future are real and visible and all around us."³²

Whilst the prevalence of serial killers in Gull's visions of the future is specific to his character, the appearance of William Blake, and Gull's earlier vision of an animal-like deity, recall Moore's own experiences and interests. In his correspondence with Dave Sim Moore reports having had visionary contacts with the demon Asmodeus,³³ and his sustained interest in Blake is evinced by his spoken word performance *Angel Passage* (2001), a homage to Blake.³⁴ The relationship between Gull and the author is more powerfully ambivalent now than it was when the book was first written. Gull is a monster, a serial killer of women whose actions Moore never attempts to glamorise, yet he is also a visionary who seems, in the heights of ecstasy, to have a psychic connection with Blake, and whose ideas would have a profound effect on Moore's life and career. As Moore tells it:

One word balloon in *From Hell* completely hijacked my life... A character says something like, 'The one place gods inarguably exist is in the human mind'. After I wrote that, I realised I'd accidentally made a true statement, and now I'd have to rearrange my entire life around it. The only thing that seemed to really be appropriate was to become a magician... I'm dependent on writing for a living, so really it's to my advantage to understand how the creative process works. One of the problems is, when you start to do that, in effect you're going to have to step off the edge of science and rationality.³⁵

Furthermore, for all Moore's criticisms of Gull's freemasonry, this tradition has strong connections with modern ritual magic, to which Moore now devotes much of his time and energy. As Ronald Hutton notes in *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft*, many modern occult societies derive much of their

32 McCloud (1993)104.

33 Smoky man and Millidge, eds. (2003) 326.

34 For an analysis of Blake's role in Moore's work see Roger Whitson, "Panelling Parallax: The Fearful Symmetry of Alan Moore and William Blake", *ImageText* 3.2 (Winter 2007).

35 Steve Rose, "Moore's Murderer". Interview with Alan Moore. *The Guardian* 2nd February, 2002. <<http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/sciencefiction/story/0,6000,643500,00.html>>

symbolism and ritual, not to mention their emphasis on secrecy, from the secret societies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, of which the Freemasons were the most prominent.³⁶ Hutton adds that one key difference between the two traditions can be seen in their attitudes to women, and in this Moore and Gull are indeed polar opposites. Moore is both intrigued and horrified by Gull's experience, disgusted by his actions and ideology but enthralled by the heights to which these actions manage to take him. I suggest that Moore's solution, unplanned though he claims it to have been, was to produce *The Birth Caul*, a text which reclaims visionary experience and casts it in more democratic, less violent terms.

The Birth Caul, subtitled "A shamanism of childhood", was originally a spoken word performance read to music by Moore in November 1995. It was one of several site-specific performances that developed out of Moore's magical work during this period, along with *The Moon and Serpent Grand Egyptian Theatre of Marvels* (1994), *The Highbury Working* (1997), *Snakes and Ladders* (1999) and *Angel Passage* (2001). Moore has said that he and his collaborators Tim Perkins and Dave "J" underwent a magic ritual to decide how to proceed with the project, and having written it almost at the last minute, concluded that "the trick to these things seems to be to plan as little as possible and trust in the process itself to carry you through to the correct conclusion."³⁷ That both *The Birth Caul* and *Snakes and Ladders* have subsequently been adapted as comics is due in large part to the strong working relationship that Moore had developed with Eddie Campbell throughout the production of *From Hell*, which was still going on when *The Birth Caul* was written and performed. It is hardly surprising then that *The Birth Caul* and *From Hell* have a number of themes in common in spite of their obvious superficial differences. In comparison to the sprawling *From Hell* and the pornographic marathon of *Lost Girls*, *The Birth Caul* is tiny: a 48-page comic, folded and stapled, printed on thin newsprint and self-published by Eddie Campbell in 1999. It was written shortly after the death of Moore's mother, and is, in part, an autobiographical work. However, for all its compact size, its scope is vast, encompassing local history, child development, language acquisition and the formation of personal identity.

36 Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 52-65.

37 Interview with Eddie Campbell in *A Disease of Language* (2005). N. pag.

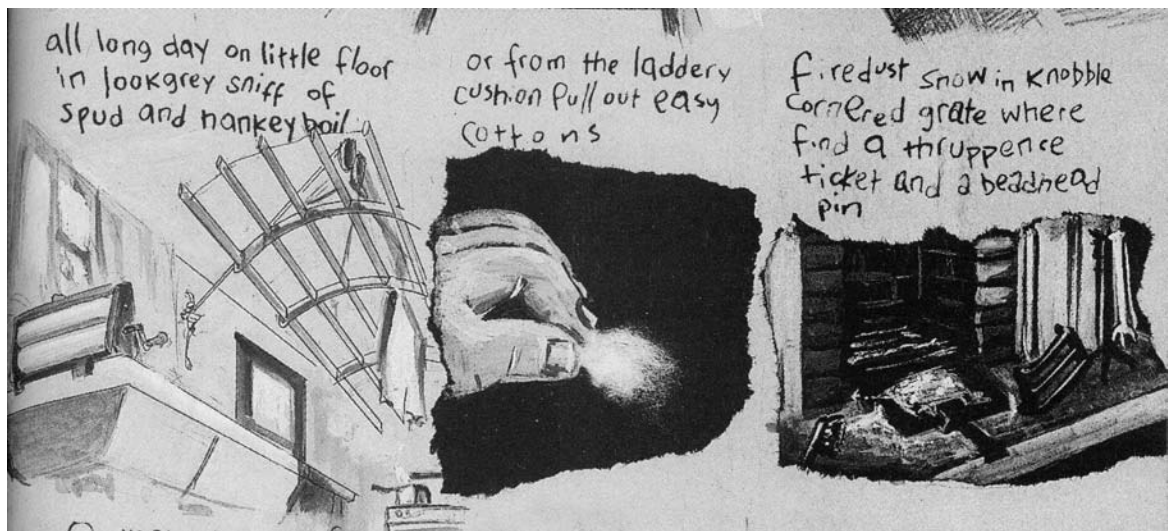


Figure 39.

Moore is not the first person to have used the comic book form to explore perceptions prior to language acquisition or beyond the grasp of normal language. Chester Brown's unfinished *Underwater* spends several chapters charting the early perceptions of a baby, with speech rendered as incomprehensible syllables ("leesh ya neesh fee thuw turlen", etc.).³⁸ Likewise Dave Sim's *Cerebus*, as I have already discussed, excels at representing the experiences of comatose, hallucinating or visionary characters in a manner that necessarily transcends speech. *The Birth Caul*, however, explicitly addresses language acquisition as a key moment in an individual's development:

The Birth Caul is our converse, a concealed interior surface to the death mask, faint Turin impression of the foetal squint and scowl, our destinies bound not so much within our brow as in the flimsy curtain drawn across it; a mosquito net to trap our earliest, strangest dreams; the web in which our eyelids twitch and struggle. Long before we have the word, before the dressing of the tongue, before society makes us a dummy to its gross ventriloquism, this ripped page is our first text, our only copy of a script from which we must rehearse the world... (34)

Where Gull transcended language only in the heights of visionary ecstasy, *The Birth Caul* suggests that in childhood everyone experiences a similar freedom from the "gross ventriloquism" of civilised behaviour. Most notable is Moore's paradoxical use of a textual metaphor ("this ripped page...") for a pre-linguistic state. In his article, "Unwrapping the Birth Caul", Marc Singer engages with the apparent problem of Moore's verbal dexterity in a text about the tragedy of language acquisition. He uses

³⁸ Chester Brown, *Underwater* #1 (Drawn and Quarterly, 1994) 9.

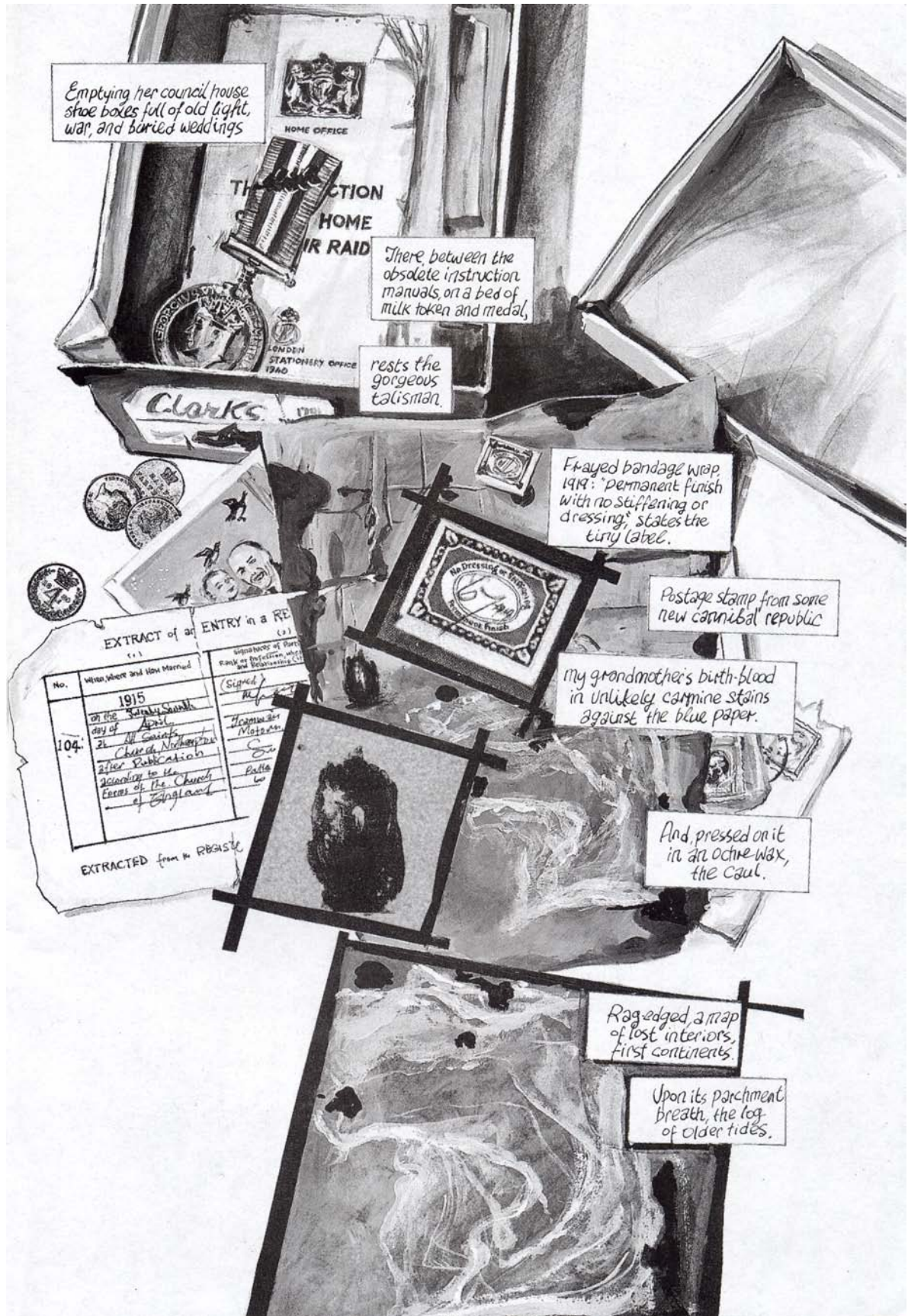


Figure 40.

the twentieth-century psychologist Piaget in order to explain:

Moore's linguistic command in *The Birth Caul* is not a logical impossibility but rather the only feature that makes his narrative possible, as Moore's metaphoric gifts are the nearest means of approximating the earliest modes of human consciousness.³⁹

Singer also points out that Moore presents a Romantic view not only of history but of individual human lives, suggesting that the intuitive, prelinguistic awareness of childhood is tragically lost in the transition through speech to an adult understanding of the world. What he does not do is to address the key correspondences between *The Birth Caul* and *From Hell*. The argument of *The Birth Caul*, with its elegy for a forgotten interval in our personal history, is a miniaturised version of Gull's commentary on history, only here Moore has no character to hide behind: the voice is unmistakably his.

The Birth Caul is an adaptation of a text spoken in a particular place and time, and like *From Hell*, it is preoccupied with relationships between selfhood, time and geographical space. Superficially, *The Birth Caul* is concerned less with patterns in geography and history than with the drudgery of people's lives in factories and fast food restaurants. Early on, the text gives a brief history of Newcastle (the location of its initial performance), from 123AD to McDonalds and Topshop in a double page. Even on a microcosmic scale, space is important: a young child's description of "worldwood roof of undertable" and "house row all with sick long face" transforms a familiar urban space into a vast, alien landscape (Figure 39). Perhaps more importantly, Moore's description of the birth caul itself includes a geographical metaphor – "Rag-edged, a map of lost interiors, first continents. Upon its parchment breath, the log of older tides" (Figure 40). In this Moore gestures towards a hidden geography, a reading of space that is lost not just in the spirit-crushing routine of nine-to-five jobs but in the inevitable transition to adult selfhood. As in *From Hell*, people and place, geography and history are inseparable. The label on the caul's wrapping is a "postage stamp from some new cannibal republic", a relic of the early twentieth century and an incongruously neat tag for this foreign artefact. The page embodies the strangeness of the caul: set against the scattered ephemera of organised society (photos, leaflets and certificates), the caul is a frail, unfathomable

39 Marc Singer, "Unwrapping *The Birth Caul*". *International Journal of Comic Art* 6.1 (2004) 247. This paper offers an excellent analysis of the main themes of *The Birth Caul*.

shape described in messy, abstract swirls of white paint. The layout of the page – pale, shapeless form emerging from an opened shoe box amongst a cluster of tattered personal effects – hints at the unknowable space, beyond language and therefore beyond memory, which the caul signifies for Moore.

From Hell was simultaneously ordered and chaotic, exhibiting patterns whilst never quite allowing readers to comprehend the whole picture. In *The Birth Caul* Moore articulates the view that linear time is a prison, and so the narrative does its best to escape from a clearly structured, ordered panel sequence. Although the arrangement of panels is roughly linear on many pages, the text and images often sprawl across the page, unbounded by panel borders. Campbell uses collage fragments more in this text than in *From Hell*: photographic images, reproductions of other artists' work and scraps of printed text are jumbled together with fabric and wallpaper. In this respect *The Birth Caul's* fractured representation of childhood is reminiscent of Gaiman and McKean's *Violent Cases* (1987), which I will discuss in the following chapter. Like McKean's comic, it deals in memories: odd incidents and dreams, a television with insect legs, a giant ox-tongue. Campbell also uses a far greater variety of media than he did in *From Hell*, with some pages dominated by squiggly pencil marks and others awash with watercolour. The effect of this variety is to pull the text in two directions, on the one hand linking the narrative to the real world and pushing it towards the everyday experiences of the readers, yet at the same time pulling away, towards a less easily defined mode of consciousness. There is a feel of the deliberately homemade about *The Birth Caul*, a calculated lack of polish. As with many small press comics and fanzines, this slight clumsiness is a part of the point, a rejection of the over-produced slickness of mainstream consumer culture.

With its low production values and its explicit references to the lives of working class Geordies (from mills, factories and typhoid in the nineteenth century to the "boil-in-a-bag" contemporary life spent at "the lathe, the desk, the counter"), *The Birth Caul* represents an attempt to reclaim visionary experience from the hands of one serial killer and place it in the domain of ordinary people. *From Hell* stressed the polarities of class in late Victorian England, with the Queen's plan to cover up a royal scandal leading to Gull's murder of five Whitechapel prostitutes. *The Birth Caul* takes Gull's experience and insists that it is not only available to anyone but that it is naturally experienced by *everyone* in visionary "dreamtime" of pre-linguistic

childhood.

The fact that childhood is also a major theme in *Lost Girls* may account for some of the tensions in this conspicuously adult text. *Lost Girls* is a grand, elaborate work of pornography which incorporates characters from nineteenth-century children's fiction and questions relationships between imagination and reality, sexuality, selfhood and trauma. As a comics scholar one learns to judge a book by its cover, or at least, to pay close attention to the choices an author makes about the form, shape and materials in which a text is produced. Seen from the outside, *Lost Girls* is a text begging to be taken seriously: three large hardcover volumes presented in a purple slipcase, priced at \$75US. These are no flimsy Tijuana Bibles to be sold under the counter: Moore and Gebbie's erotic thrills don't come cheap.⁴⁰ The price is a particular irony because Moore has always been careful to describe *Lost Girls* as pornography rather than erotic literature on the grounds that the distinction between the two is primarily one of the reader's social class.⁴¹ And given that, for legal reasons, the book's UK distribution was delayed by over a year, *Lost Girls* is a remarkably exclusive pornography.⁴²

The comic's long gestation matches its substantial weight. The first two chapters of *Lost Girls* were published in single issue format in the early 1990s, but the rest remained unpublished until 2006. The project started in 1991 as a collaboration between Moore and illustrator Melinda Gebbie. (As Moore himself has joked, the book worked wonders for his relationship with Gebbie, whom he married in 2007.)⁴³ Whilst the initial idea for *Lost Girls* was Moore's, Gebbie's input was undoubtedly substantial. Although, as Charles Hatfield argues, Moore's interest in sex has been evident throughout his career, Gebbie was drawing erotic comics long before Moore even entered the comics industry.⁴⁴ She was a regular contributor to *Wimmen's*

40 For a more detailed history of erotic comics, see Tim Pilcher, with Gene Kannenberg, Jr. *Erotic Comics: A Graphic History from Tijuana Bibles to Underground Comix* (New York: HNA, 2008).

41 See, for example, Jonathan Kuehlein, "More of Moore". Interview with Alan Moore. *Metro News* 14th August, 2006. <<http://www.metronews.ca/column.aspx?id=5028>>

42 For the news story on Great Ormond Street Children's Hospital's objection to *Lost Girls*, see Jack Malvern, "Comic row over graphic Peter Pan". *The Times*, 23rd June 2006. <<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article678107.ece>>. For Moore's comments on the threat of legal action see Noel Murray, "Interview: Alan Moore". *The Onion A.V. Club*, 22nd August 2006. <<http://www.avclub.com/content/node/51180>>

43 Murray (2006).

44 Charles Hatfield, "A Review and a Response" *ImageText* 3.3 (Summer 2007). <http://www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/archives/v3_3/lost_girls/hatfield.shtml>



"The room returned at last. My father's friend was gone; left hurriedly as though late for some appointment, nothing save a crumpled handkerchief to mark that he was ever there. My clothing had been readjusted hastily; one buttonhole left surplus at the collar. Everything was different. In the mirror sat my lover, watching me with heavy eyes between the strands of fallen blonde, my scent evaporating on her fingertips.



"I stood, and weaved on someone else's legs towards the looking-glass. She rose and came unsteadily to meet me, lifting up her hand to press with mine. Beneath our palms the glass was cold, unyielding; I no longer felt like me. The house no longer felt like mine. I had not substance. I was the reflection. From beyond the mirror-pane the real me gazed out, lost; quite hopeless.



"The clock's dull murmur measured off the silence like a senile relative. I stumbled in a trance towards the hall and there collapsed upon the checkered tiles, a toppled pawn. My parents, when they found me, put it down to too much sun. I never told my father that his friend had visited, and after that he never called again. By evening I was barely sure the afternoon had happened."

Figure 41.

Comix in San Francisco in the early 70s, and in 1977 she published *Fresca Zizis*, which was subsequently seized and burnt by UK customs, appearing in court alongside Crumb's *Troubles with Women*.⁴⁵

In keeping with pornographic tradition, the plot of *Lost Girls* is fairly simple: three women meet in an Austrian hotel in 1913 and proceed to have a lot of sex whilst narrating stories of their previous sexual encounters, particularly those early encounters that played a formative role in their sexual identities. Moore's narrative incorporates numerous references to contemporary art, music and politics: the women attend the opening night of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* (1913), and their stay in the art nouveau Hotel Himmelgarten ends with the start of the First World War. The women are based on characters from children's literature of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth centuries: Lady Fairchild is Carroll's Alice, Dorothy Gale is Dorothy from the *Wizard of Oz*, and Mrs Potter is Wendy from *Peter Pan*. There is, of course, a great variety of sexual activity in *Lost Girls* (although several critics have reported finding it rather wearing and repetitive after a while).⁴⁶ What interests me here is not the sex itself but Moore's vision of sexuality as a creative force, the ways in which sexual experience affects the emotional lives of the protagonists, and the particular ways in which Moore and Gebbie have used the comics form.

All three women have in the past suffered negative consequences of sexual relationships: the young American Dorothy eventually confesses that she was sent away to Europe after her stepmother discovered she had been sleeping with her father, and Wendy Potter admits:

My own desire had scared me so badly that I locked it all away in the darkness beyond those railings. I married Harold, twenty years my senior, because desire... w-well, frankly, it wouldn't be an issue" (Ch.27, 7)

Still, it is Alice whose past is the most deeply traumatic. She tells the story of her first sexual experience in chapter 9, "Looking Glass House" (Figure 41). Like all Alice's recollected anecdotes, this chapter does not take a traditional comics form, but moves towards the conventions of children's picture books, with elliptical

45 Ismo Santala, interview with Melinda Gebbie. *Ready Steady Book*. 9th November 2006. <<http://www.readysteadybook.com/Article.aspx?page=melindagebbie>>

46 Kenneth Kidd reports being "more bored than titillated", while Philip Sandifer summarises other critics' sceptical responses to the text. Kidd, "Down the Rabbit Hole", and Sandifer, "Introduction – ImageSexT: A Roundtable on *Lost Girls*", *ImageText* 3.3 (Summer 2007) <http://www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/archives/v3_3/lost_girls/>

panels captioned underneath with the adult Alice's commentary. She describes an unwanted encounter in which her father's friend, "Bunny", plies the fourteen-year-old Alice with wine and sexually abuses her. In an ostentatious device typical of *Lost Girls*, every image in this chapter includes a reflection: water, glass, metal and the pupils of Alice's eyes refract scenes from an incident that leaves its narrator feeling disconnected from her self:

I no longer felt like me. The house no longer felt like mine. I had not substance. I was the reflection. From beyond the mirror-pane the real me gazed out, lost; quite hopeless. (Ch 9, 7)

The reader's prior knowledge of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) is essential, because Alice's tale of trauma turns Carroll's version into a sweetened gloss, the encoded dreamwork of a troubled and damaged psyche. Various details of Carroll's tale are absorbed into Alice's version: the drink, the abuser's appearance and preoccupation with time, the inversion of normal rules and so on. Most important is the displacement of the protagonist's self onto a looking-glass Alice to whom all this is happening, a behaviour that recalls Lynda Barry's teenage victims with disturbing accuracy (see Freddie, for example, in Figure 18). It is only at this point that we understand the full implications of the book's opening scene: Alice has carried the looking glass from that room around with her throughout her adult life, and addresses the other, fourteen-year-old Alice as a beloved child from whom she has been separated. At the end of *Lost Girls* she is content to leave the mirror behind and we see soldiers smashing it as they ransack the hotel, but as Hatfield argues, her equanimity is not altogether convincing:

... there are disquieting moments of ambivalence and irresolution (understandably, as the sex in the book leaves few proclivities unexplored). These moments are disquieting because they are minor admissions of guilt that, ultimately, are not allowed to upset or even to make compelling dramatic sense within the novel's utopian world. Perhaps Moore and Gebbie deserve credit for dredging up some darkness; yet... I don't think *Lost Girls* deals with those dark moments persuasively... If *Lost Girls*, as Kenneth Kidd argues, simultaneously "attests to trauma and celebrates erotic power," it does so by slighting the consequences of the former and exaggerating the healing efficacy of the latter.⁴⁷

47 Charles Hatfield, "A Review and a Response" in *ImageSexT: A Roundtable on Lost Girls*. *ImageTexT* 3.3 (Spring 2007) (para. 12) <http://www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/archives/v3_3/lost_girls/hatfield.shtml>



Figure 42.

As I discussed in chapter 4, Julie Doucet uses double self-images to examine multiple possibilities in the construction of feminine identity. For her the double or mirrored self, even in an abject body, is not a loss but an exploration. For Alice, however, the mirror-self is the result of a violent rupture, a forced split that leaves the real world Alice appallingly damaged. The trajectory of *Lost Girls* resembles that of *The Birth Caul*: both chart the fall from a pure childhood state into a repressed and civilised adult world. In *Lost Girls* uninhibited sex has the power to shake individuals out of their repression and the tensions associated with a hidden sexuality, but this resolution is not without its problems.

It is worth juxtaposing Alice's case with that of Swamp Thing because the two characters appear to represent polar opposites in their models of selfhood. Alice is a traumatised individual who needs wholeness, or at least a convincing illusion of coherent selfhood. As Marina Warner pointed out in her analysis of literary metamorphoses, the literature of doppelgängers is bound up with the history of illusionism: it is no coincidence that Alice and her uncanny double exist in a story that is full of visual trickery.⁴⁸ In Chapter 3, "Missing Shadows", Harold and Wendy Potter hold a mundane conversation about his work whilst their shadows appear to be having sex (Figure 42). Separate narratives run in parallel, either in the form of juxtaposed sets of panels (in Chapter 20 an opium-fuelled sex scene runs alongside the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand) or in sequences where the verbal and visual texts tell different stories (in Chapter 11 Harold's staid letter to a friend acts as a voiceover to the orgiastic adventures taking place all around him). Words and images do not necessarily collaborate but contradict each other, revealing each other's lies. The narrative is a concoction of tricks, and any image could at any moment turn out to be misleading. The result is that the identities of *Lost Girls'* protagonists, especially Alice, are profoundly unstable. For all her supposedly modern tastes and opinions, Alice is a creature of the nineteenth century, and in spite of the deceptive brightness of Gebbie's drawings, there is a Gothic shadow to her doubling. Even when she shakes off her other-Alice by leaving the mirror to be destroyed, she cannot convincingly become whole for the reader because she is always already doubled, the alter ego of Carroll's Alice who continues to exist

48 Marina Warner, *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). Warner makes some particularly useful comments on Lewis Carroll, particularly his *Sylvie and Bruno* books, one of which is depicted on the front cover of *Lost Girls* Vol. 1.

beyond her grasp. Swamp Thing, on the other hand, readily comes to terms with the impossibility of a coherent subjectivity and explores the potentialities of his new, rhizome identity. Almost a century beyond Alice, he is a late modern figure who accepts that there is no going back to his old illusions of humanity. He is a contemporary of Deckard in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (which appeared in cinemas in 1982, the year before Moore took over *Swamp Thing*), dynamically questioning the possibilities of his nearly-human identity within a tradition of post-human science fiction that has continued to the present day.⁴⁹

I have so far paid little attention to the role of Gebbie's art in the comic. Gebbie is largely self-taught and her work has none of the technical sophistication of erotic artists like Hans Bellmer, whose work she cited in a 2006 interview.⁵⁰ With their coloured pencil and somewhat awkwardly posed figures, her drawings are more reminiscent of the life-size pencil sketches of Pierre Klossowski. In fact *Lost Girls* is the most technically proficient of all Gebbie's work, and her 1970s comics have a distinctly amateurish, homemade feel. Like Lynda Barry, Gebbie refuses the slick professionalism of mainstream comics artists, and her representations of sex are arguably more real for their flaws and clumsiness. That said, Gebbie is a consummate plagiarist and easily forges Beardsley, Schiele, Toulouse-Lautrec and many others. *Lost Girls* is overflowing with visual references to early twentieth-century art, with copied, borrowed and appropriated material. Indeed, the book would lead us to believe that we are at times reading a copy of a fake of a fake: Lady Fairchild insists that Rougeur's *White Book* is a forgery. Optical devices are only one aspect of the book's gaudy display: from the wallpaper to the window-boxes, everything is decoration, surface, artificiality.

The artificiality is part of the point, because Moore's insistence on the power of the imagination is bound up with Monsieur Rougeur's defence of pornography:

Incest, c'est vrai, it is a crime, but this? This is the *idea* of incest, no? And then these children: how outrageous! How old can they be? Eleven? Twelve? It is quite monstrous... except that they are fictions, as old as the page they appear on, no less, no more. Fiction and fact: only madmen and magistrates cannot discriminate between them. (Ch.22, 4)

49 I recommend Elaine L. Graham's *Representations of the Post/Human: Monsters, Aliens and Others in Popular Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002) as an introduction to this sub-genre of science fiction. Incidentally, Moore, who generally expresses indifference to cinema, claims to have enjoyed *Blade Runner*. See Robinson (2001).

50 Santala (2006).

This is undoubtedly a taunt at the censors: as Gebbie, Crumb and many others have found to their cost, fiction in comics form is particularly vulnerable to accusations of obscenity. It no coincidence that *Lost Girls'* publisher, Top Shelf, is run by Chris Staros who is also president of the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund, a US organisation "dedicated to the preservation of First Amendment rights for members of the comics community".⁵¹ Censorship aside, Moore has frequently used his later comics as an opportunity to lecture on the power of the imagination. In *Promethea* (1999-2005) he literalised imagination in the form of the Immateria, a magical realm of which imagination was the level closest to the physical plane. In the Immateria, as in the Dreaming realm of Gaiman's *Sandman* (1989-96), all stories are real, and the oldest, most archetypal stories are the strongest (Red Riding Hood's wolf, for example, is vast and powerful because as *Promethea* says, his story "probably goes back to the Stone Age") (Vol.1, ch.3). Even as he acknowledges that it is an "utterly inane" idea, Moore is very taken with the thought that well-known characters can break free of their original narratives and wander off into each other's stories: his *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (1999-) is founded on this concept.⁵² *Lost Girls* is not just a pornographic parody of *Alice in Wonderland*, *Peter Pan* and *The Wizard of Oz* but a typically late modern blag, a claim that all stories and characters are up for grabs. In Moore's case, however, this playful gesture is also a deadly serious argument, because although the appropriation of material from all over the place was a common trick throughout the 1980s and 90s, Moore has a greater personal investment in the concept of imagination than many writers.

In 1993 Moore declared himself to be a magician, and he has spoken at length about the similarities between magic and writing. In an interview with Bill Baker he claimed:

I think that storytelling and creation are very close to the center of what magic is about. I think not just for me, but for most of the cultures that have had a concept of magic, the manipulation of language, and words, and thus of stories and fictions, has been very close to the center of it all.⁵³

51 For further information on the CBLDF, including current court cases, see <<http://www.cbldf.org/>>

52 Alan Moore, "Introduction", *Saga of the Swamp Thing* (Vol. 1) 9.

53 Baker (2005) 9.

I have been arguing for a relationship between Moore's neo-Romanticism and his increased interest in magic in the 1990s. Both are linked to his belief in the power of the imagination and the power of language to manipulate the perceptions of others. In *Apocalyptic Transformation: Apocalypse and the Postmodern Imagination* Elizabeth Rosen argues that for Moore, the faculty of creativity gives humans near-godlike status, and makes them worth saving from the many apocalyptic threats prophesied in his narratives.⁵⁴ Unlike Aleister Crowley, who used the spelling "magick" to distinguish occult ritual from stage conjuring, Moore suggests that "both disciplines are concerned with the manipulation of human perception and thus the manipulation of human consciousness."⁵⁵ It is worth noting that there are also clear historical links between modern ritual magic and the philosophical and creative ideas prevalent at the beginning of the nineteenth century, by which Moore has been so strongly influenced. Neopagan practices, which were once thought to have their roots in pre-modern beliefs and rituals, are considered by modern scholars to have developed since the early nineteenth century. Arguing that neopaganism is an essentially modern and "spectacularly counter-cultural" religion, Ronald Hutton argues:⁵⁶

...the characteristic language of a committed modern paganism has its direct origin in German Romanticism, the result of a fusion in late eighteenth-century Germany of three powerful forces: admiration for ancient Greece, nostalgia for a vanished past, and desire for an organic unity between people, culture and nature.⁵⁷

Moore does not subscribe to any particular magical tradition, sharing Blake's view that "I must create a system or be enslav'd by another mans";⁵⁸ but the evidence suggests that his neo-Romanticism and his magical beliefs ultimately derive from the same source.

In *Visionary Fictions: Apocalyptic Writing from Blake to the Modern Age*, Edward Ahearn examines the works of a number of English and French writers from Blake to Burroughs. He argues that these writers' texts, which typically privilege sexual

54 Elizabeth Rosen, *Apocalyptic Transformation: Apocalypse and the Postmodern Imagination* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2008) 37-8.

55 Campbell interview, in *A Disease of Language* (2005).

56 Hutton (2001) vii.

57 Hutton (2001) 21.

58 William Blake, "Jerusalem" copy E, pl. 10. *The William Blake Archive*. Ed. Morris Eaves, Robert N. Essick, and Joseph Viscomi. <<http://www.blakearchive.org/>>

ecstasy as a route to visionary experience, express hostility towards conventional religion, and use a wide range of devices to suggest that “the world as we perceive it is an impoverished and dull thing”, are also deeply concerned with real world history, even to the point of advocating political revolution.⁵⁹ It is not hard to place Moore in a similar tradition. Surveying his comics since the 1980s, it becomes apparent that behind his preoccupation with individual perception and experience there lies a powerful social awareness. *V for Vendetta* (1982-88) was transparently a swipe at Thatcherite Britain; various episodes of *Swamp Thing* comment on environmentalism, gender relations and AIDS; *From Hell* and *Lost Girls* are both deeply aware of social class, and the latter is also set against the backdrop of events leading up to the First World War. Moore is not only a magician but describes himself as an anarchist, as suspicious of systems of political power as he is of organised religion.⁶⁰ Throughout his work, his political and spiritual views, his privileging of individual, intuitive selfhood above social structures and conventions, point to a decisively neo-Romantic sensibility.

Moore produced his best work in the 1980s and 90s, and his recent ABC line is of minor critical interest. He has more or less retired from comics in order to concentrate more fully on his work in magic, and in this sense he is unique amongst those authors discussed here in that he is concerned with subjectivity *per se* as much as with its representation in fictional form. All three of Moore’s mature works – *From Hell*, *The Birth Caul* and *Lost Girls* – ultimately centre on the loss of a creative, intuitive, sexually uninhibited part of human consciousness. However powerful the comics form may be, Moore’s work demonstrates the impossibility of fully recapturing this consciousness on paper, either in language or image. His ambitious project now takes him beyond the bounds of representation.

59 Edward Ahern, *Visionary Fictions: Apocalyptic Writing from Blake to the Modern Age* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996) 3.

60 *Strangers in a Tangled Wilderness* (2007).