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# **‘Tales Worked in Blood and Bone’: Words and Images as Scalpel and Suture in Graphic Narratives**

By Jon Saklofske

There is a lingering irony in the proliferation of

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academic interest in and acceptance of graphic narratives as “serious” story spaces since Art Spiegelman refigured the Holocaust as an illustrated beast fable. The translation of historical trauma into a storyboard and people into personified animals has been perceived as a radical and refreshing move – yet the distancing function of this multiply-mediating medium has been eclipsed by its novelty as a vehicle for historical confrontation and remediation. The extent of Spiegelman’s innovation is that he uses the accessible and familiar form of the comic book, which appeals to a wide-ranging readership, to deliver a focused interrogation of historical circumstances (that are difficult to comprehend) from a personal perspective that is neither completely abstract nor partial. However “raw” such a juxtaposition and re-presentation seems, though, Spiegelman’s tragic comic is not all that innovative in its combination of pre-existing literary narrative customs and formal comic book conventions. Many other creative efforts, such as playful illuminations in the margins of medieval manuscripts, religious emblems, the work of William Blake, and the political cartoons of James Gilray, among others, have imaginatively combined the sister arts of poetry/words and painting/images for “serious” narrative purposes

# GAIMA'

A Special  
Issue on the  
works of Neil  
Gaiman

Fairy and  
Faerie: Uses  
of the  
Victorian in  
Neil  
Gaiman's and  
Charles  
Vess's  
*Stardust*

Through  
Every Mirror  
in the World:  
Lacan's  
Mirror Stage  
as Mutual  
Reference in  
the Works of  
Neil Gaiman  
and Tori  
Amos

Incommensurable

well before Spiegelman's *Maus*. While *Maus* is certainly a significant point in the history of graphic narrative representation, especially given its role as a catalyst for increased academic attention to this form, little overall attention has been given to the mediating functions of this and other examples of composite art in relation to their re-presented human subjects (an issue that *Maus* certainly foregrounds). "Wordsworth," an unconventional and lesser-known graphic "short story" involving a creative collaboration between writer Neil Gaiman and artist Dave McKean, highlights the functional ability of words and images to simultaneously inform and deform the human body and the human being through self-reflexive elements of form and content. The *ethical* significance of this function is crucial in a market dominated by historical and autobiographical graphic narratives such as *Epileptic*, by David B., *Persepolis 1 & 2*, by Marjane Satrapi, Joe Sacco's *Palestine* and Chester Brown's biography of Louis Riel. The particular meeting and mingling of the sister arts in "Wordsworth" offers a grotesque caution regarding the performative capability of multiply mediated representations. Its fictional status allows its creators to experimentally illustrate the effects of representative multiplicity in graphic

Ontologies  
and the  
Return of the  
Witness in  
Neil  
Gaiman's  
*1602*

Get  
Gaiman?:  
PolyMorpheus  
Perversity in  
Works by  
and about  
Neil Gaiman

Phantom  
Towers:  
Crypto-  
towers  
Haunting  
Dave  
McKean's  
*Cages* and  
*Mirrormask*

'Being'  
Decentered  
in *Sandman*:  
History,

narratives and interrogate the functional effects of the sister arts on the human condition without disfiguring or harming a historical subject.

“Wordsworth” is no Lyrical Ballad, but is one of three stories in Book Twenty of Epic Comics’ early 1990s series entitled *Hellraiser*. The series invited writers and artists to create fictional stories based on the following formula derived from Clive Barker’s story *The Hellbound Heart*: a human being’s fear of the unknown is overcome by a desire to go beyond the limits of extreme experience and sensation, to exceed the ennui that results from the commonplace routines of everyday living. The title and name of the main character of Gaiman and McKean’s contribution indicates their connotative awareness of and indebtedness to the parallels between Barker’s explorations of the human condition and those Romantic writers and characters of the long nineteenth century who meditated upon poetic subjectivity, imagination and the mediated relationship between material and spiritual concerns. The promethean and tragic excesses experienced by Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner, Lord Byron’s Manfred, Matthew Lewis’ Monk, Mary Shelley’s Victor Frankenstein, and even Oscar Wilde’s Dorian Gray illustrate the

Dreams,  
Gender, and  
the ‘Prince of  
Metaphor  
and Allusion’

‘Tales  
Worked in  
Blood and  
Bone’: Words  
and Images  
as Scalpel  
and Suture in  
Graphic  
Narratives

*The  
Sandman* as  
a  
Neomedieval  
Text

Review of  
*The  
Sandman  
Papers: An  
Exploration  
of the  
Sandman  
Mythology,*

sympathetic connections and interplay between the aesthetic and ethical concerns found in Romantic period writing and Barker's well-worn paradigm. Paralleling these characters' consumptive desire for knowledge and abilities beyond the moral boundaries of their time, the opportunity for characters to realise their enigmatic desires in Barker's story and its graphic offspring is provided by Hell's agents in the form of puzzles that require some effort to complete. Those who solve the puzzles open a doorway to an extreme experience of pleasure and pain, but the price of such experience is that the individual in turn becomes one of the hellish messengers who provide puzzle-based opportunities to other desiring souls.

"Wordsworth" does more than merely fill Barker's pre-determined narrative paradigm with a new graphic exemplum; it ruptures the expected transparency of its own mediating vehicles by making words and images part of the puzzle through which one is transformed from a passive recipient of representation into a tortured storyteller. As we strive to understand the narrative puzzle offered to us by Gaiman and McKean, we become aware of our own involvement in the cyclic affectation that is played

ed. Joe  
Sanders

Notes on  
Contributors

out for us on their composite stage. “Wordsworth” names the story and its main character, a reclusive museum librarian whose world of books, language and abstraction is too much with him. Unchallenged by the crossword puzzle in his daily newspaper, he is presented with an oddly configured word puzzle from which he “expects nothing of substance.” Standard crossword strategies fail him and he comes to realise that the clues demand words that result from personal memories and experiences. The experiences and actions that become necessary to produce the word-based solutions increasingly require a sacrifice of passive disconnection, physical wellness and ethical limitation. For example, one early clue requires that Wordsworth drop a book on the head of his co-worker to hear her “cry of book-borne pain.” Her subsequent curse (“Jesus Sodding Wept!”) fills in a section of the puzzle and helps to fulfill Wordsworth’s desire for completion, solution and understanding (Gaiman and McKean 8-9). Although words become the only reward worth gaining from the experience demanded by the puzzle’s clues and, while these words finally become more valuable than the experience itself, their worth depends on and is constituted by such experience and substance.

Prior to encountering the puzzle that encourages Wordsworth to trade his conscience for desire, to affect the world around him in pursuit of words, the librarian prefers the society of books and self-referential word puzzles, shunning the incomprehensible world beyond the museum walls. However, after receiving the hellish crossword, Wordsworth progressively, or perhaps regressively, is guided by the directives of the puzzle's clues, working to distil words from the extremes of the "real" human world of causes and effects, actions and consequences, in an effort to fill blank, empty spaces with autographic marks of understanding. Further clues demand that Wordsworth, merely for the sake of a few words, participate in acts of bondage and flagellation, dine with coprophiliacs, cut a dog apart to view its intestines, and set fire to a crowded building. His desire for "substance" in his negotiations with the words behind the world results in the disintegration or transgression of physical, cultural and ethical boundaries. The word puzzle prompts him to engage in a disconnected and objective, yet involved and experiential attempt to materialize the textual, to subject the physical world to the imperatives of written language in an effort to realize the words which will provide the solution to the puzzle of his life. Wordsworth's

confidence in and obedience to the powers of language are reminiscent of the seductive rhetoric and the abstract, idealistic imperatives used by the Nazi regime to not only instigate the tragic reality of the Holocaust, but also to subsequently distance themselves from such a reality.<sup>1</sup>

Wordsworth's dusty life of text without context is revitalised by the puzzle that tempts him to reconnect word and experience. However, utilising words as his scalpel, his exploratory and selfish surgery on the world results in deformation, destruction, the erosion of humanistic and bodily coherence, and, ultimately the end of his human life. The solution to Wordsworth's word-based life puzzle that demands a literal dissection of experience, then, is the death of his innocence and humanity. Eventually, his own body is literally reconfigured into the words of a story and he becomes the shattered child of a process of textualization in which reality and representation irresponsibly collide. The tale ends with Wordsworth's resurrection as a grotesque storyteller, indeed as the narrator of this story itself (of which he is also the subject), who is composed of both flesh and text, who demands to be loved and listened to, and who converts all experience into "tales

worked in blood and bone,” “writhing tapestries of choice, [with] violence implicit in each scratching and syllable” (3). In contrast to the healthy, but half-aware librarian who greets us at the beginning of the tale, the final page of the graphic narrative presents an image of an experienced, but destroyed body that is barely held together by words.<sup>2</sup>

This story, then, does not convey much optimism about the effects of linguistic representation, even though Wordsworth claims that “words are everything” (9). In Wordsworth’s case, words initially isolate him from the world and lead to the boredom that fuels his destructive desires. Then, words promote his eventual escape from the self-referentiality of language into a closer contact with sensory, bodily experience, but do so in an ultimately fatal way that rends as it renders. Finally, the words of the crossword puzzle which are reductively extracted from such experience become sutures as they are stitched together in the subsequent story that Wordsworth tells. However, this textual narration of loss and corruption is an insufficient skin that is barely able to hold his tattered and scattered self together. Through Wordsworth’s extremity, Gaiman suggests that a return to the body via

language can lead to the deformation and eventual destruction of the former for the sake of the latter's translational demands.

A closer look at the two types of word puzzles that determine the trajectory of Wordsworth's fall from lifeless existence will help to discern the power that Gaiman attributes to the language that both he and his main character are indebted to for their rise and fall, respectively. The traditional crossword puzzle that Wordsworth has grown tired of by the time his narrative begins is a space in which individual words are called forth by largely self-referential clues that rely on word play and puns. These individual words form an interlocking pattern, but the connection is largely arbitrary. Without a specifically required word, the pattern cannot be completed. Without the pattern, the words can still stand alone; their physical relationship with other words in the puzzle is the factor that provides clues to their identity, but not to their meaning. In this traditional crossword, then, words beget words and shared letters are the points of contact. The structure of the crossword is not temporal and the process of engagement is not linear – completed, it is static, a visual structure composed from final solutions, a freeze frame of balanced answers, an

abstract snapshot. The crossword thus appropriates words for its own ends, shaping their use through rules of engagement, pattern-making and production that remain independent from the original semantics of the words that it uses or referring to these contexts only tangentially through a collection of disposable and independent clues. Fundamentally, the traditional crossword and the librarian of "Wordsworth" function in quite similar ways: the crossword, a flat, fragmentary parade of recontextualised words that have little connection to an actual world outside the puzzle's visual network, employs these units for its own ends without regard for other orders of causality and meaning. Likewise, a perceptually insular Wordsworth, surrounded by the dead leaves of the library and shaped by his mastery of puzzles whose form and function promote ethical abstraction and meaningless distance between words and the world, is initially unmoved by the world outside his train window, which he describes as an unsatisfying parade of allotments, and eventually unmoved by the real effects that he has on this world in the name of the word.

The puzzle that tempts Wordsworth away from his passivity takes the form of a progressive

narrative – indeed, its sequential clues generate and order the events of this hellish pilgrim's progress, appealing both to Wordsworth's memory and to his imaginative inspiration. In a narrative, words are linked by a grammatical structure, yet this structure and its components are often transparent in relation to the progression of events and materiality that the language suggests.<sup>3</sup> Such narrative conventions function in the same fashion as Wordsworth's false crossword, the hellish puzzle offered to the then-passenger by a man who tellingly, not ironically speaks only broken English. This challenge reintroduces the librarian to the connections between words, objects and actions, between representation and reality; the clues shift importance away from the mediation or re-presentation of experience (the form) to experience itself (not only the content, but the signified behind the signifier). Ultimately, though, Wordsworth's progress remains subservient to the word, for his experiences lead to and demand a textual solution – the means by which he re-enters the world are also the ends of such engagement, and a means of escape or distance from ethical culpability. To this end, he is driven by his pre-existing preference for "true friends," the words and stories contained by the 200 000

books in the museum library, over the incomprehensible and alien creatures he works with. However, the solved puzzle is not a static, sterile, meaningless cross-word structure. Rather, progression, movement and change arise from the interactions between the words that initiate experience, experience itself and the words produced by those experiences. This connective and dynamic function of words, which call for experiences that in turn produce words, demands active participation and understanding, a limited, but necessary materialization by those involved in the hunt for narrative fulfillment.<sup>4</sup> In this case, though, that the end of both the puzzle and this story is Hell, an understanding that is only achieved by progressive destruction and a mutual imposition between language and its user.<sup>5</sup> Each new word in this narrative puzzle that Wordsworth discovers signifies an experience, but also a loss, and the chains of words that form his story signify a slow conversion of a life into a deformed narrative epitaph. Overall, then, while the initial crossword consists of meaningless intersections of already-empty vehicles, this story and its hellish narrative vortex trace the process by which sense and substance are inspired by, then inevitably reduced by and to the vacant and destructive mechanism of language.

Yet this story does not conclude with complete destruction. It is told, narrated by a grotesque figure who constantly reminds us to see the story in relation to the body that caused it and in relation to the “tattered flesh and tattered tongue” that narrates it. Thus, although we witness the destructive power of language as Wordsworth’s body decays in the service of the word, becoming more story than substance, we also discover that the narrated, performed story entitled “Wordsworth” is, through the rotting and receding lips of the narrator, a hybrid of flesh and representation, a distorted resurrection of the flesh and experience that originally generated the words through his experience. Wordsworth is literally buried and dismembered because of words both extant and imminent as the narrative progresses, but, in the *retelling*, he is re-covered and re-formed by these same words, which become the skin that holds him together as his vulnerable flesh gives way. Although the resulting transformation is monstrous, and a distorted image of the man that was is precipitated out of the very language that originally dissolved his being, it cannot be denied that language is imaginatively shown to display a somewhat preservative function in the case of Wordsworth. However, the *thing* from whom the tale emerges

is almost unrecognizable as a human being, recalling Victor Frankenstein's monster, a creation born from one man's desire to emulate the creative power of the Christian God.<sup>6</sup> If the word of this God is the apex of creative imperative, then our echoes of such performative statements following the fragmentation of linguistic coherence after Babel are little more than incoherent and imperfect babble that similarly rend the coherence of whatever we subject to such creative re-presentation.<sup>7</sup>

The fact that this is an illustrated narrative, however, cannot be ignored when attempting to understand the commentary that it subtly offers about the effects of textuality on the human body. The term "illustrated" is misleading, though, for it suggests the use of image in the service of a definitive text. Like William Blake's artistic additions to his and others' poetry 200 years before the publication of "Wordsworth," the illustrations here work with the text, but reveal something other than the text. If one takes either on its own, the story's cohesion or completion breaks down. The images are stills that, like the spacing and visual patterning of a traditional crossword, demand no justification for their placement, and by themselves are puzzling

designs whose ambiguity opens gaps that beg to be stitched together by words. Conversely, the words of the story, at times set apart from the images and at others directly fused with the images, rely on the power of these images to fill the silences within the printed narrative with visual information that bears a more direct resemblance to that which it represents. Although McKean uses photographic material in his digital pastiche, the images that he creates for “Wordsworth” are not realistic representations by any stretch of the imagination. But they are not unrealistic abstractions either. McKean presents the reader with images that remain representative and retain recognizable elements between frames, but deny a reader’s expectation of visible consistency and continuity. The features on characters’ faces do not quite fit together and do not always fit together the same way. These inconsistencies and the incongruities that they highlight within the mixed-media form of the graphic narrative parallel and amplify the moral perils of Wordsworth’s pursuit of exclusively textual and supposedly stable readings during his material and affective engagement with the world. As well, perspectives and placements shift within and between frames – the seams of McKean’s collage are not disguised, but rather

foregrounded, highlighting the kind of hypermediacy that Bolter and Grusin associate with self-conscious and self-reflexive forms of representation. Yet awareness on the part of McKean and Gaiman as to the alien and alienating nature of representation through their own creative hypermediacy and Wordsworth's actions does not necessarily entail exemption from such effects. Like Wordsworth, McKean is a reader of Gaiman's narrative puzzle, whose attempt to materialize and realize the textual cues and clues is morally perilous. However, while each image displays and distorts its subject simultaneously, McKean's mediating art and artifice rely less on abstraction and arbitrary, conventional associations than language inherently does.

The graphic narrative form in this particular case and, I would argue, in general, is presented as a necessary cooperation between the visual image and the word, between showing and telling. This complicity confirms that, despite formal differences between the two media, functional similarities are certainly possible and conventionally necessary in the multiply-mediated space of the graphic narrative. Indeed, the epigram at the beginning of this story, quoted from seventeenth-century satirist Samuel Butler's

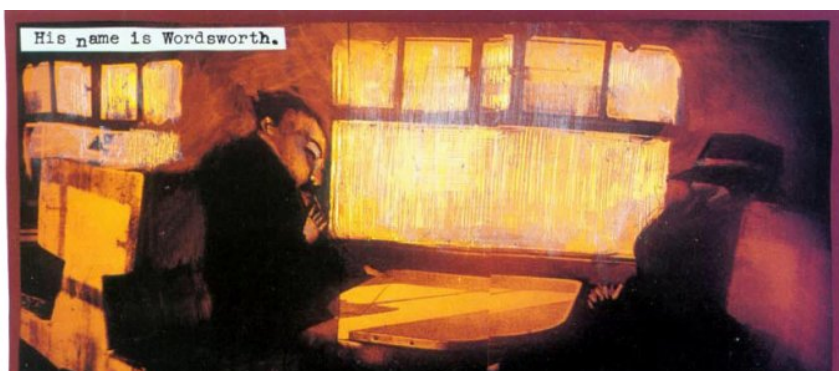
“Upon the Abuse of Human Learning,” emphasises this functional collusion, stating that “words are but pictures” (3) and implying that, together, McKean’s images and Gaiman’s words are as morally suspect as Wordsworth’s textual engagement with the world. Still, the two media, and thus the two authors, exist in a state of tension and compete for space on the page. Such proximity and implicit antagonism is reminiscent of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s eighteenth-century treatise on the arts, entitled *Laocoön*, which advises that:

Painting and poetry should be like two just and friendly neighbours, neither of whom indeed is allowed to take unseemly liberties in the heart of the other’s domain, but who exercise mutual forbearance on the borders, and effect a peaceful settlement for all the petty encroachments which circumstances may compel each to make in haste on the rights of the other. (110)

Initially, words and images are segregated on Wordsworth’s pages, occupying their own bound and framed spaces in a manner that confirms the persistence of Lessing’s powerful counsel (see fig. 1).<sup>8</sup> At times, these “sister arts” overlap in the

service of the design, but rarely intersect. The third-person, present tense narrated text of the story is typeset and encapsulated in a white, non-transparent rectangle that almost always acts as foreground. Similarly, the images are also bound and separated from each other by burgundy frames and arranged in a sequential design. In contrast, the images *within* the frames consist of computer-manipulated collages of photographs, paint and etchings that result in blurred forms and distorted perspectives. The few consistencies between the illustrated frames provide partial links, but connecting them as a series is not simply enforced by spatial ordering and proximity. Rather, the images, while emulating the words of written language in that they are presented as a linked series from left to right and top to bottom, rely heavily on a reader's own puzzle-solving ability to narrate the connections between them. Here, the text can often act as a bridge, and the understanding of the image is calibrated by the grammatical continuity of the textual narrative, though this relationship is easily and often reversed, as the images often provide narrative bridges between sparse textual cues. Contemporary readers who have been exposed to the traditions of twentieth-century comic books will be familiar with such co-dependency. Indeed,

this comfortable, now-conventional symbiosis between words and images on the comic page and the sequential, narrative nature of this hybridity are all-too familiar in that the multi-media comic page generates expectations of both an easier reading/viewing experience (because of the expected harmony between mutually informative words and images) and a more detailed overall representation (given its media multiplicity). What is most interesting about “Wordsworth,” though, is the way in which the form of this narrative increasingly undermines such standards and conventions of interart collaborations, and the way that the structured linearity and formal traditions of the printed word increasingly gives way to the unstable dynamic of McKean’s images, despite Wordsworth’s claims to the contrary. Reflexively calling attention to its own forms of mediation, this story interrogates itself, its complicity in the process of deformation that Wordsworth reveals, and, by extension, the graphic narrative form.<sup>9</sup>



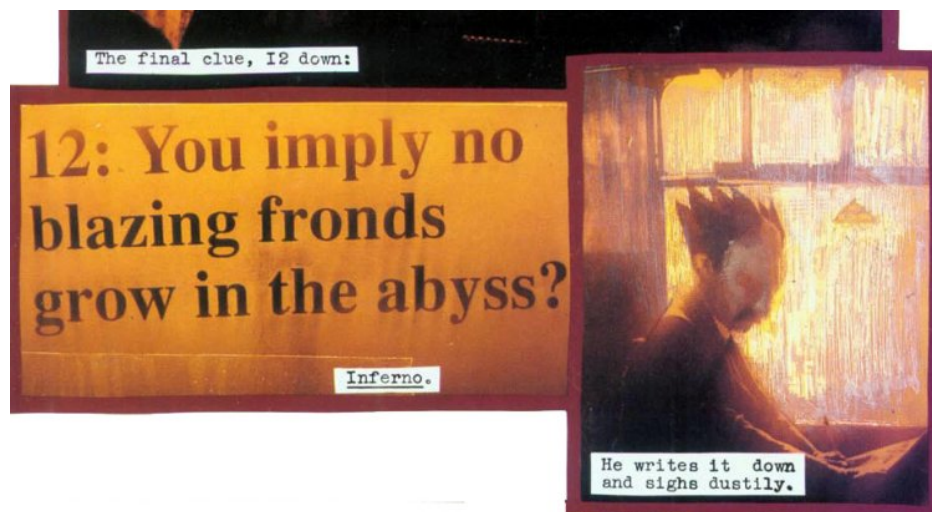


Figure 1. Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean, "Wordsworth."  
In *Clive Barker's Hellraiser*. Book 20, p. 4. (New York:  
Epic Comics, 1993)

Even from the beginning of the narrative, the typed text is imperfect, despite its mechanical reproduction. The alignment of words and letters falters, some are crooked and smeared, and errors are over-typed. All of this lends an unrefined and organic quality to the portion of the page where order and structure would be expected, revealing compositional scars, remnants and foreshadowings of the processes and violence that this story associates with mediated creativity, and reinforcing the narrative's demonstration of the deformation that can occur during the process of mediating a subject through language. As the narrative suggests, though, the order and structure of written language, and its abstracting function that obscures both the unsatisfying

incomprehensibility of the world and the messiness of creative and interpretative processes, also provides shelter and comfort to the librarian. This function of language has falsely empowered him and he impotently exercises this power by completing self-referential crosswords that require no engagement with the real.

However, his satisfaction has reached a plateau that is based solely on textual association and production, prompting restlessness that eventually leads Wordsworth to the world beyond words, if only to mine its experiences for more words that, through their scarring, are impossible to fully abstract.

In addition to the typed text that both highlights and resists its own artifice, the borders that surround both text and image are rough-hewn and inconsistent, as if made by a free hand without rule (see fig. 2). These crooked borders are overlapped by adjacent images, and are increasingly compromised. At the same time, in the narrative, Wordsworth begins to transgress ethical boundaries in his search for pleasure, experience and more meaningful words. Such an association introduces ethical considerations into this story's multi-media formal scrutiny – confronting the beauty and truth of formalist

aesthetics with grotesque duplicity. The persistent tension between differing functions of each medium and between the media themselves in the hypermediacy of this self-reflexive graphic narrative calls attention to the importance of such dynamics in all graphic narratives, even the ones that take their formal complexities for granted.



Figure 2. Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean, “Wordsworth.”  
In *Clive Barker's Hellraiser*. Book 20, p. 9. (New York:  
Epic Comics, 1993)

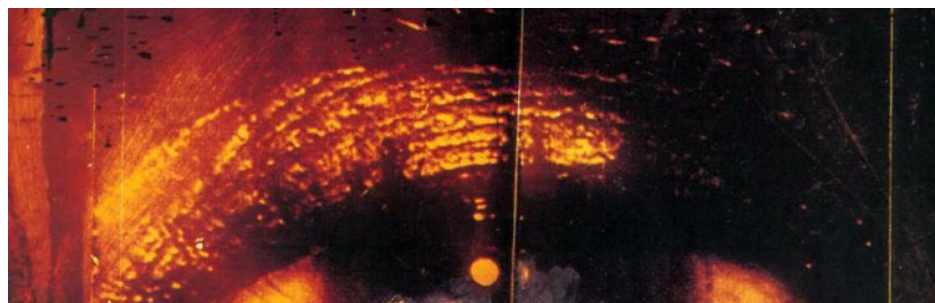
Other words make their way directly into the image. Spoken dialogue is handwritten and etched within the image – and the implicit suggestion is that it has a different relationship with the world, a more embedded and process-oriented function. Reinforcing this distinct functionality, the dialogue is largely composed of colloquial, incomplete sentence fragments, unlike the segregated and supposedly polished typewritten narrative that consistently obscures the graphic imaginings of Wordsworth's world. As the connection between words and sensory, bodily reality is encouraged by Wordsworth's continued work on the strange puzzle, the boundaries between the images and words of the narrative erode further. When the final part of the puzzle is completed (The clue: "The doorway"; the answer: "Hell"), the words of the narrative pause, images take over, and the word-filled puzzle is consumed by flame, using conventional symbolism to associate the puzzle and its words with a doorway and with Hell. The unconventional puzzle, which reconnects words(worth) to the world is Wordsworth's doorway to a hellish end, but that hellishness also the puzzle's essence. Yet the narrative has revealed that words, whether a product of heavenly abstraction or hellish engagement are equally alien to life.



Figure 3. Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean, "Wordsworth."  
In *Clive Barker's Hellraiser*. Book 20, p. 13. (New York:  
Epic Comics, 1993)

No longer do the images fill the page sequentially, like the words of a sentence. The image, unbound and unchallenged by a now-silent narrative, floods the whole page and the full extent of the bodily destruction and deformation that has resulted from Wordsworth's efforts to connect word and experience is displayed through a collage of x-rays, photographs and anatomical diagrams which imperfectly intersect to produce a

grotesque cross-word-like parody of the human form (see fig. 3). The next two pages reintroduce words into the design, but conventional “comic-book” patterns of distinction between the two media are abandoned (see figs. 4 & 5). Both media work together to illustrate, in terms of Wordsworth’s body, E.H. Gombrich’s assertion in *Art and Illusion* that “Nature cannot be imitated without first being taken apart and put together again” (141). The scars of this process in Wordsworth’s case are uncompromisingly evident – words themselves are carved into his eye (destroying his vision with their imposition) and on every inch of his flesh. As a result, Wordsworth embodies mediation and, while the words appear to collectively clothe him in a skin of language, each word, each letter is also an incision which severs as it connects, and each represents a distinct and self-authored act of destructive making that illustrates the paradox and alienated self-awareness at the heart of Barker’s paradigm and Gaiman and McKean’s interartistic collaboration.



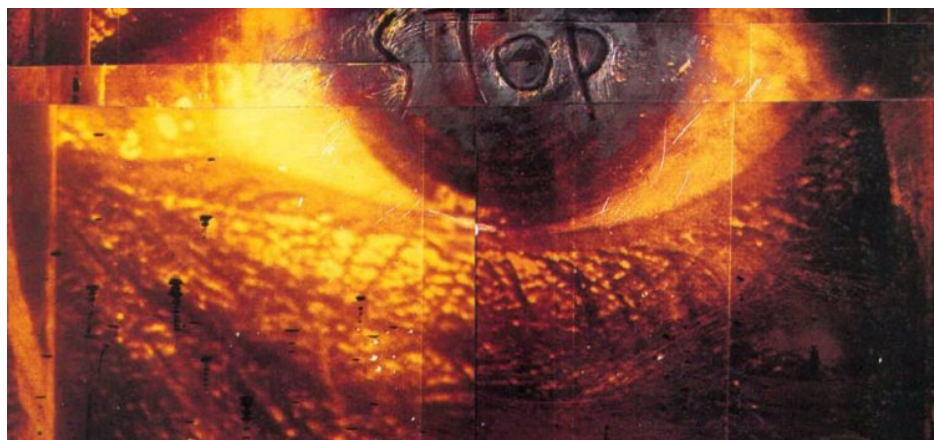


Figure 4. Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean, “Wordsworth.”  
In *Clive Barker’s Hellraiser*. Book 20, p. 14. (New York:  
Epic Comics, 1993)

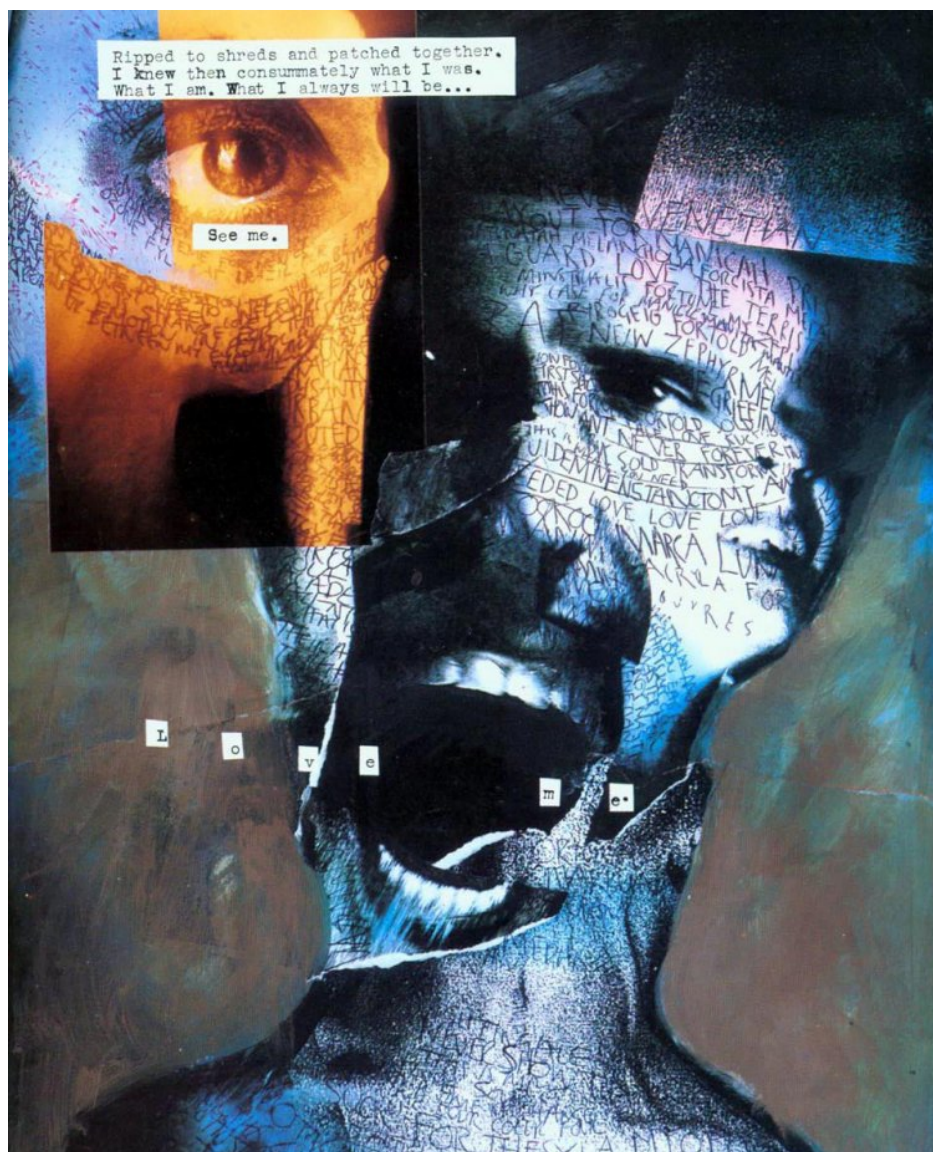


Figure 5. Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean, "Wordsworth."  
In *Clive Barker's Hellraiser*. Book 20, p. 15. (New York:  
Epic Comics, 1993)

The denouement that follows displays an ironic return to frames and boxes (see fig. 6). The narrator's voice returns to close the story, but the image of human bodies that fills the page remains graphically and narratively unbound. Indeed, the irony cuts deep, for not only are the bodies within the image already (de)composed of a cut and paste collage and thus deformed, but the textually aligned frames that attempt to organise, justify and explain the image dissect the bodily images further. On the final page the image echoes the narrated, boxed utterance, "Love me" (17), and the words, an impossible imperative for the reader, appear as a new set of deformative marks upon the already overly-represented body (see fig. 7). The irony continues here, for the words invite the same involvement and participation with the narrated and narrative body that caused such disfigurement in the first place.

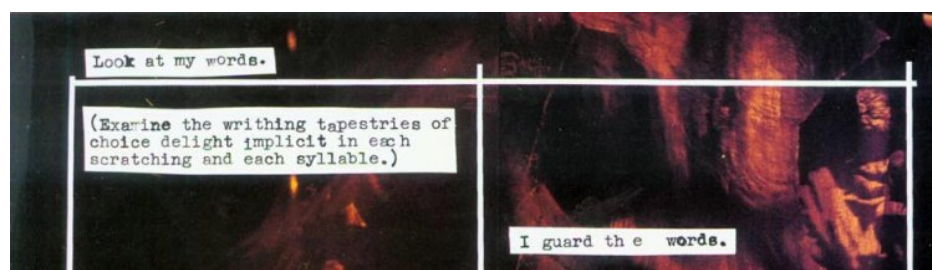




Figure 6. Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean, "Wordsworth." In *Clive Barker's Hellraiser*. Book 20, p. 16. (New York: Epic Comics, 1993)





Figure 7. Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean, “Wordsworth.”  
In *Clive Barker’s Hellraiser*. Book 20, p. 17. (New York:  
Epic Comics, 1993)

A single word, “Wordsworth,” encompasses the form, function and content of this self-reflexive graphic narrative. As the story progresses, the word, the character and the work all become increasingly excessive signifiers. Initially, Wordsworth the character is lonely and isolated, but an unconventional word puzzle (unconventional in the sense that it trades

abstract structure for actual meaning) prompts him to return to the world. This rediscovered connection between reality and its representations causes the character to become the story. At the end of the narrative and, like the narrative itself, Wordsworth, a librarian become storyteller become disembodied mediation, demands to be loved, to be listened to. He, like the hellish puzzle, demands an involvement and understanding beyond disconnected perception, demands a realisation of the connection between the words of the narrative, their perceived meanings, and his graphically rendered body. He also implicitly demands that we, as readers/lovers, recognise our active complicity in this distortion of humanity into mediated intersections between patterns, images and words.

“Wordsworth” demonstrates that words are more than an ordered and abstracting mechanism of mediative ends, that they can function in an entirely opposite way – as the doorway to dynamic, process-oriented and engaged beginnings (though both functions ultimately lead to the same reductive extremity). Given this functional plurality, to assume that McKean’s images are faithful reporters that effectively and

innocently illustrate the authorised violence at the heart of the re-presentation of Wordsworth's human form through written mediation would be only partially correct. While the image in this particular graphic narrative does expose the defiling nature of language-based processes of mediation and understanding, as another form of mediation, it is far from innocent. While the content of the story is guided by the obsession of its narrator (and writer) for words and ignores the possibility that images might possess similar functions in a graphic narrative, the form of this composite quietly "illustrates" that this may be the case.

Wordsworth is corrupted by words that deform the real as they form patterns and stories during his search for representative solutions to real puzzles – yet this tale is also revealed in images that form stories and patterns, and such patterns reveal and perpetuate deformation much more explicitly and immediately than do the words. As well, McKean's created images are as much representations as the words that fill in the spaces of Wordsworth's puzzle. Like the photograph, McKean's two-dimensional images feature flattened, frozen bodies (often of Wordsworth himself), which are detached from temporal

continuity and spatial volume. Beyond the dismemberment associated with photographic representation, though, the altered images of Wordsworth, created from collage, pigment and pixels, consist of words and images that have already been consumed by McKean's artistic eye, digested by his mind, excreted by his hand and offered to us for further consumption. Thus, the images of "Wordsworth" are not innocent: like the self-referential crossword structure that initially isolates Wordsworth from the human world, McKean's visual collage interacts with Gaiman's narrative words to produce a closed-system of self-reflective representation in which Wordsworth, the character, is subjected to multiple feedback loops of mediated deformation. Most importantly, McKean's sinister images represent deformity and further deform that which they represent.

Does this graphic narrative thus doubly participate in the destructive practices that its story criticises? Initially and separately, word and image act like scalpels and disfigure the reality that they attempt to represent. Together, however, they also suture a shattered, but not scattered body, and support each other like two imperfect mirrors that face and reflect upon each other.

Although the result is a grotesque, composite collage, Wordsworth's body, destroyed and remade by, yet trapped between these mediating mirrors, serves as a safe simulation and illumination of the moral perils that shadow this process of narrative-making and reception.

Wordsworth, the man become story, implicitly condemns the sterility of the isolated word and the imperfect suture of linguistic narrative, and also implicates the distorting obscenity of the image in such a process, yet uses the accused media to form such accusations while explicitly voicing his devotion to the very processes that authored his degradation. The historical namesake of the librarian, William Wordsworth, similarly and paradoxically used poetic writing to accuse words and books of dominating late eighteenth-century British culture and creating an unhealthy dependence on concepts and abstractions rather than on one's perceptions and lived experience. Gaiman and McKean create a powerful composite narrative that transforms a character who is motivated by a desire for mediative power into a grotesque collage of story and image. The work of these collaborative authors displays a result that tragically demands to be loved, to be consumed, while also

demonstrating that the making-real processes embodied by this mixed-media form parallels the questionable activity of Wordsworth and of readers in general. Together, the image and the words of this imaginative narrative representation are literally damned and fatally celebrated, and we are all implicated in Wordsworth's fate.

Overall, then, where is the human being in the midst of this graphic narrative? Perhaps the abstract image and the empty vehicle of language, the sterile and incestuous coupling of the sister arts, the inescapable world of mediation that is too much with us, is the human world. As the narrative initially demands from the reader:

"Gather round damned children, and together we shall lament and celebrate the configuration that made us what we are, today and forever" (3).

Indeed, as a critical voice, I continue the self-referential emulation of the narrative, the performance of the process, and the abstraction of the real. As Northrop Frye suggests, "the perverted imagination with nothing real to work on is forced to turn analytic and dissection, and all dissected things are uniformly hideous" (56). Is the last image of this graphic narrative, then, besides being our final vision of Wordsworth, also an accurate representation of the distorting critic?

Or, perhaps it is a distorted representation of the accurate critic, the readers and the collaborative authors of this narrative, of those who create, fill in and guard the stories, who invest in the worth of words and who ask to be loved and understood. The words and experiences that this fictional Wordsworth finds in the world to solve the hellish puzzle remind us how disconnected we are from such engagement, how, like the initial state of the librarian, mediation protects us from the incomprehensibility of our world while also revealing it.

Yet, while the graphic narrative produces a double mediation, it also is well-suited to position each of the mediating processes that it contains against the other's reductive functions. Although still safely indirect, such questioning might bring us closer to the real, not by lifting the veil of representation, but by calling attention to its opacity and by pluralizing our perspective. While multiplying media might result in a similar multiplicity of distance and deformity, the excesses of the graphic novel might also function in a *remedial* way. "Remediation," a concept explored by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin in *Remediation: Understanding New Media* is

Defined by Paul Levenson as the “anthropotropic” process by which new media technologies improve upon or remedy prior technologies. We define the term differently, using it to mean the formal logic by which new media refashion prior media forms. Along with immediacy and hypermediacy, remediation is one of the three traits of our genealogy of new media. (274)

The relationship between remediation, immediacy and hypermediacy is as follows: The incorporation of existing media forms and strategies into new forms of mediation can result in a subtle “immediacy” of presence, whereby the included medium becomes a part of the transparent functions and processes of the new form (just as the deforming and reforming properties of language and visual representation become crucial to the simultaneous operation of words and visual image in Gaiman and McKean’s graphic narrative). Conversely, “hypermediacy” occurs when the adopted medium can be displayed openly as a sort of relic (as when a character in a graphic novel reads a book, or finishes a crossword puzzle). While there are some concerns with Bolter and Grusin’s

evolutionary media ecology, in that they seem to implicitly essentialise specific media properties and privilege new forms of composite media over other forms, the word “remediation” implies not only the possibility of intermedial adaptivity (which is a usefully remedial response to Lessing’s attitude of provincialism and privilege toward the relation between the sister arts), but also suggests that the refashioning of media forms serves a counteractive and corrective function. Indeed, new media forms might also remediate older paradigms and renew familiar forms with innovative functions. Such a notion is well-suited to optimistically explain the worth of Wordsworth’s graphic narrative form in relation to its content: although not really an example of “new media,” (though Gaiman and McKean’s creative resistance to a number of comic conventions helps to partially redefine the scope of graphic narrative practice), the hybridity of the graphic narrative can be seen to counteract and interrogate the devastating functions of language (as seen through Wordsworth’s decay) by showcasing its effects as a hypermediacy. In other words, by representing words and word puzzles as artefacts within the story itself, Gaiman and McKean allow their readers to gaze on represented and thus disempowered forms of

mediation, while the authors adapt and reconfigure the reductive functions of words as an “immediacy” into the graphic novel’s integrated form of mediation. Consequently, this effort communicates, but never fully resists Wordsworth’s fate.

Working against this remedial optimism, though, is the indeterminacy and plurality of the ways that words and images function in this graphic narrative. As has been suggested, the inconsistency of both representation and representative function in this narrative raises some concern as to whether the ideal possibility of remediation has been realized here, or whether the authors’ choice of mediating functionality, a lack of choice, or a lack of attention to the possibilities and implications of such choices, have compounded the destructive power of textual mediation that Wordsworth is seduced by and succumbs to, by extending such capabilities to the visual image. While this entire debate might appear unimportant to some, given that both the narrative and subject of “Wordsworth” are entirely invented, the powers and possibilities of mediating functions and potential manipulations of such functions are just as important to the critical understanding of graphic narratives as the

stories that they tell. Usefully, Wordsworth's story focuses on such issues, but the powerful, emotional stories featured in graphic narratives such as Spiegelman's *Maus* or *In the Shadow of No Towers* are capable of eclipsing the "hypermediacy" of their mediating forms.

Spiegelman does place comic strips and comic books as artefacts within his narratives, however, and these self-reflexively draw attention to the form of his narratives. However, Bolter and Grusin's conceptualizations suggest that the presence of such relics implies that the media form in which they appear is somehow greater, either in scope or ability (which raises some interesting possibilities for critical responses to Spiegelman's strategy).

Overall, the numerous and conflicting functional possibilities available through words and images remind us how crucial the selection of such functions is to the overall experience of the story. While graphic novels are relatively new to academic study and still relatively young, as far as media forms go, many comic book creators, even the "serious" ones, take for granted already-established traditions and conventions. Yet multiple authors and multiple media allow graphic narratives to retain a connection to print

culture traditions, but also to emulate many of the opportunities afforded to creators of digital narrative. It is our privilege, as outsiders to such tradition and potential, to closely explore the assumptions that are made in the complex suturing of such mediation, and, remembering Wordsworth's fictional plight, to reflect on the ethical implications of formal choices and mediating assumptions on narrative trajectories when the subjects of such serious comic books are much closer to what we consider to be "real." This privilege becomes even more of a necessity in an age when graphic novels are already being remediated through cinema (*Sin City, A History of Violence*) and digital gaming (*XIII, Ultimate Spider Man*). Although the lag between creative output and critical engagement is nothing new, the rapid development of intermedial forms of narrative expression and experimentation highlights the importance of interdisciplinary cooperation and dialogue between various academics and theorists, for although the sister arts debate seems extremely remote from a flash-enabled, serial graphic narrative on someone's blog, each of these can mutually illuminate our understanding of the other. "Wordsworth" demands such attention and engagement by demonstrating the hellish results of irresponsible

mediation and interpretation.

## Notes

[1] I raise this point because Wordsworth's use of language as both character and storyteller fatally demonstrates a necessary concern about what words *do* to and for their subjects, regardless of intention. This functioning and its relationship to the effects of visual representation needs to be explored further in relation to Spiegelman's work and the work of other graphic narrative authors. Further, the parallel between Wordsworth's faith in the worth of words and Nazi rhetoric recalls some of the critical links established between Romantic idealism and egotism, and twentieth-century fascism and national socialism. After all, Wordsworth's Romantic period namesake, William Wordsworth, attributed his poetic genius and powers of perceptual imposition to poetic language.

[2] This figure is reminiscent of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's ancient mariner, who, after thoughtlessly killing an albatross, is condemned to an eternal life-in death, a personal Hell, in which he must endlessly wander the earth as a lonely storyteller who demands to be loved,

simultaneously tortured and torturing those who listen to his tale. The final few stanzas of Coleridge's ballad demonstrate the effects of the mariner's tale on a wedding guest who turns away from the celebration and becomes a "sadder and a wiser man" (624).

[3] Bolter and Grusin refer to this type of transparency as "immediacy" or the erasure of the gap between signifier and signified.

[4] This process is not only akin to the reading process, but also to the process of exchange involved in the creation and critical reception of this graphic narrative – Gaiman's words generate McKean's responsive images which collectively facilitate a critical understanding of the story that relies exclusively on words to achieve and extend narrative fulfillment.

[5] Linking vitality and experience with Hell is nothing new – William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790) is an innovative combination of words, images and genres of writing to promote the same message, though Blake is much more encouraging about hellish capability than McKean and Gaiman's tattered narrator.

[6] In a wonderfully applicable development, Frankenstein's creature learns to interrogate, question and even to deny the power of his creative father once he learns language. The functions and dangers of human words, then, are aptly questioned by Gaiman and McKean in a story that presents performative language as a code that contributes to its protagonist's fall into antagonistic egotism, that lures Wordsworth away from the world as it is, toward an ironic and hellish sense of creative accomplishment and power.

[7] For an interesting exploration of this relationship between language and divine creativity, see Paul Auster's *City of Glass* (which has also been translated into graphic narrative form).

[8] Fittingly, Lessing's work explores the differences between painting and poetry to ultimately confirm the superiority of poetry, or written expression. Wordsworth, both the narrative and the character, serve to corroborate, but also to ironize this power of words through a gradual transgression of the borders that Lessing defends.

[9] This observation has been inspired by N. Katherine Hayles' term "technotext", which she defines in *Writing Machines* as a "literary work [that] interrogates the inscription technology that produces it, [and] mobilizes reflexive loops between its imaginative world and the material apparatus embodying that creation as a physical presence" (25). However, "Wordsworth" is not a true technotext in Hayles' sense of the word: it would have to interrogate the form of the printed page, the computer technology that aided McKean's artistic inscriptions, and the published forms of the text, both as part of the original comic book series, and as part of the reissued hardcover collection. While "Wordsworth" and this paper do not extend their reflexive loops this far, such a critical approach to graphic narratives in general would be a fruitful path of enquiry – for example, one might choose to explore the potential meanings and implications of hand-drawn and hand-written graphic narratives against those produced digitally.

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