2010

Comics Against Themselves: Chris Ware's Graphic Narratives as Literature

David M. Ball
Dickinson College

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.dickinson.edu/faculty_publications
Part of the Creative Writing Commons, and the History Commons

Recommended Citation

This article is brought to you for free and open access by Dickinson Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator. For more information, please contact scholar@dickinson.edu.
CHAPTER SEVEN

Comics Against Themselves: Chris Ware’s Graphic Narratives as Literature

—DAVID M. BALL

The recent rise in scholarly interest regarding graphic narratives has been precipitous and remarkable. This intellectual ferment is evidenced both by the strength, volume, and range of the comics produced, as well as an attendant enthusiasm and productivity in comics criticism and theory. Graphic narratives’ ability to reinvigorate literary theoretical questions of temporality, narrative, and periodization, among others, points toward the catalytic effect that studies of comics are beginning to provide for conventional literary scholarship (for examples, see Chute and DeKoven 2006; Chute 2008; Baetens and Blatt 2008).

In this essay I will concentrate in particular on periodization and explore the ways comics complicate most conventional notions of modernism and postmodernism in twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature. Namely, the development of comics can be seen as an inverted history of an admittedly caricatural, but nonetheless widely held trajectory of twentieth-century literary history, one that moves from the formal experimentation and putative disdain for mass culture in modernist texts to the playful self-referentiality and celebration of consumption in postmodern fiction. Using the recent work of Chris Ware as a paradigm, I argue that contemporary graphic narratives’ characteristic ambivalence about their status as popular cultural productions repeats modernist anxieties about literary value that reemerge precisely at the moment graphic narratives are bidding for literary respectability.
Considered at face value, however, no American medium appears better suited to the expectations of literary postmodernity—ludic irony, the willful disruption of high and low, "the consumption of sheer commodification as a process"—than that of the comics (Jameson 1991, x). Given their historic genealogy within technologies of mass production, comics remain symbolic of a near total homology of popular culture and creative expression. Their appropriation by quintessentially postmodern visual artists such as Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol as mass media emblems seems only to ratify the unassailable postmodernity of the comics medium. As evidence of this literary critical concept, take the inclusion of graphic narratives throughout the Norton anthology *Postmodern American Fiction*. The book, which includes work by Lynda Barry and Art Spiegelman, the graphic adaptation of Paul Auster's *City of Glass* by Paul Karasik and David Mazzucchelli, and references to George Herriman's seminal comic strip *Krazy Kat* in Jay Cantor's novel of the same title (as well as the collage between visual and textual materials in selections by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Kurt Vonnegut, and others), insists that literary postmodernity be both seen and read (Geyh, Leebron, and Levy 1998, 85–93, 162–73, 196–225, 295–300, 450–57). Yet, the inclusion of Herriman's figures, even in the context of Cantor's novel, is a curious one. Herriman's most productive years were the 1920s and 1930s, a time when he was feted by many arbiters of literary modernism such as Gilbert Seldes and E. E. Cummings—and working within one of American modernism's most recognizable visual registers: the iconography of the American southwest that drew modernist writers and artists in the wake of Mabel Dodge Luhan such as Willa Cather and Georgia O'Keefe (Seldes 2004; Cummings 2004).

Newspaper comics achieved a period of formal inventiveness in the work of Winsor McCay, Herriman, and Rudolph Dirks, among many others, contemporaneous with the development of artistic and literary high modernism. Indeed Dirks, whose comic strip *The Katzenjammer Kids* was imported from America to Paris and passed lovingly between Gertrude Stein and Pablo Picasso during their foundational modernist collaborations, was himself exhibited at the influential 1913 Armory Show, the artistic epicenter for American modernism (Stein 1990, 23). Despite such rich overlap between comics and modernism, however, comics have made only fleeting appearances in conventional anthologies or histories of modernist literature. If they seem only to be able to signify the postmodern, it is because American comics' popular cultural medium appears as their only possible message. In these terms, the rapid rise of the "graphic novel" in publishing and contemporary literary criticism could be viewed as the ultimate conflation of visuality and postmodernity, a
belief that characterizes the majority of contemporary work in visual studies and visual culture (for example, see the introductory gambits in Mirzoeff 1998; Cohen 1998; Manghani, Piper, and Simons 2006).

In this essay, I want to put forward a counterargument to such claims, revealing instead the persistence of modernism in that most unlikely of places: the contemporary American graphic narrative. To do so is to revisit critical debates over modernism's uneasy relationship with mass media, and the once-secure assumptions of literary and artistic modernism's austere distance from popular culture. These stem from a long tradition of theorists ranging from Theodor Adorno and Clement Greenberg to Andreas Huyssen, arguments that have recently been challenged and complicated by contemporary interventions in American modernist theory and literary criticism. Foremost among these is the work of Michael North, who in *Reading 1922* states:

The common dichotomies by which literary modernism . . . is distinguished from the larger culture of the time cannot be maintained against the evidence that the very terms those dichotomies depend on were being redefined by literature and culture in concert. . . These dichotomies cannot be used to divide modernism, for their ironic interdependence defines the modern (North 1999, 29–30).

North's point here is well taken, as evidenced by his influence on many recent studies in American modernism. However, these studies threaten to undervalue the felt antipathy the high modernists often held for mass culture. Fitzgerald's and Faulkner's widely acclaimed disdain for the periodical press or Ezra Pound's revulsion in "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley" for the "tawdry cheapness" of the modern age coexist with their very reliance on popular cultural materials within their work. Modernism's characteristic bricolage of high and low—*Ulysses* Homeric cipher and its quotidian Dublin setting, the high literary footnotes and "Shakespeherian Rag" of The Waste Land, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*'s cacophony of intellectual luminaries and sharecroppers in its opening listing of "People and Places"—all can be said to emerge exactly within this failed divide, or the divide within this divide, between high art and mass culture. It is the force of this ambivalence toward popular culture, as much as the inevitability of popular cultural influence in modernist production, which remains an important engine of the formal ingenuity and intellectual ferment of the era. The characteristically modernist text thus achieves one of its most recognizable forms in the generative tension
between the ideal and the possible, between the desire for an art produced in pure isolation from the world and that world suffused throughout the art.

Which is to say that what makes recent graphic narratives so thoroughly, persistently modernist is their continued desire to disassociate themselves from the mass media forms in which they were first produced. Despite their aforementioned avant-garde strains, American comics began in the realm of mass media and yellow journalism (the etymology for the term itself coming from Richard Outcault's "The Yellow Kid," one of the earliest, archetypal American comics characters), where they served first as a boon to mass readership. Later, with the rise of the comic book in the 1930s, comics became a vehicle for an almost exclusively adolescent audience, one resisted by the later rise of "underground" and then "alternative" comics in the 1960s and continuing to the present, shifting the medium toward the confessional, craft-focused, often self-produced avant-garde of contemporary graphic narratives today.

In doing so, this current generation of comics artists instantiates the most recognizable characteristics of modernist literature in the contemporary graphic narrative: epistemological difficulty, moral ambiguity, formal experimentation, and a conspicuous rhetoric of literary failure. This sea change has come about precisely as graphic literature aspires to the status of literature as such, and in this transformation what the reader of contemporary graphic narratives can observe is a phenomenon of comics against themselves: an ambivalent, yet determined resistance to the generic conventions and mass media associations of conventional comics artistry within the emergent field of graphic literature. This resistance, I argue, repeats and extends the most recognizable symptoms of literary modernism, confirming the claims of T. J. Clark, among others, that the intellectual crux of postmodernity may well be nothing more than the persistence of the modernist dilemma (Clark 2000).

I have been painting with very broad strokes here, and I would like to model some of these assertions in a reading of the work of Chris Ware, who is quickly becoming one of the central voices in the emerging field of graphic narratives. Ware's work has been appearing in serial form since 1993 in his The ACME Novelty Library, significant portions of which were collected as the American-Book-Award-winning graphic novel Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth (2000). Described variously as the James Joyce, the Samuel Beckett, and the Emily Dickinson of comics, Ware's work is distinguished for its simultaneous narrative complexity and richly detailed vision of human experience. More recently, Ware has also emerged as an extremely prolific arbiter
of contemporary comics, editing both the comics anthology *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* #13 (2004) and the Houghton Mifflin *Best American Comics* 2007, in addition to having his own work appear in such highly prestigious publications as *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, *The New York Times Magazine*, and *The New Yorker*. Described by Art Spiegelman as having an "uncanny . . . recollection of the history of comics, and the talent to expand upon it" (Kidd 1997, 42), Ware's already prodigious body of work as author, critic, editor, and archivist places him second only to Spiegelman himself as a shaping and determinant force in the development of graphic narratives' prominence in twenty-first-century literature.

It is one of his contributions to *The New Yorker* I will focus on here: a series of four serial covers and an online supplement to the November 27, 2006, cartoon issue, all of which have been collected as *The ACME Novelty Library No. 18½* under the title "Thanksgiving." The first four compositions of this sequence served as four alternate covers of the November 27 issue, one of which was delivered to subscribers with no indication of the existence of the other three beyond an inset "map" buried within the glossy advertisements in the magazine's opening pages. Indeed, it is safe to assume that a majority of subscribers read the magazine with no knowledge of the other three covers. In this format alone, I would argue, Ware is invoking familiar techniques of literary modernism: narrative fragmentation, conspicuous difficulty, and the cultivation of a trained, cerebral, coterie audience.

When read in sequence, these covers together—consecutively titled "Stuffing," "Conversation," "Family," and "Main Course"—trace a storyline accessible only to the most vigilant and patient of readers, revealing an almost Nabokovian sense of narrative games. At the same time they articulate a narrative of increasing visual and representational complexity, the number of panels on the page expanding exponentially from a single, wordless image in "Stuffing" to two-, four-, and twenty-four-panel compositions, culminating in a vast canvas for an online supplement titled "Leftovers" that is based on a 256-panel grid. Taken together, "Thanksgiving" serves as a rigorous reading lesson in contemporary comics, one that both exemplifies the possibilities of graphic narratives and satirizes the very impulse for comics to become literature.

The first cover, "Stuffing" (fig. 7.1), pictures a solitary, elderly man feeding pigeons on Thanksgiving Day, his back turned toward the reader. Taken by itself, it appears to be nothing more than one of the typical, single-panel illustrations conventionally seen on the cover of the magazine. Read in sequence, however, "Stuffing" establishes the dominant theme of the series of covers—loneliness and disassociation amidst the Thanksgiving celebration of
community—and introduces readers to a central character who will reemerge throughout the narrative. By itself, “Stuffing” can be read as an antitype to that most iconic of The New Yorker cover images, Eustace Tilley, whom Ware took as the subject of a study of movement in the comics medium for his cover illustration in February 2005. Rather than foppishly viewing the butterfly through his monocle, our character shies from a gas light in the figure of that same butterfly, at the same time disregarding the miniature illuminated scenes of Thanksgiving feasting that surround and isolate him in the facing buildings.

One of these miniature scenes is the subject of the second cover, “Conversation” (fig. 7.2), which zooms in on one of these lighted windows (the fourth floor of the leftmost building), depicting the same home during the old man’s childhood in 1942 and its present-day tenants. Already expecting a severe degree of visual literacy—the careful reader can match the teenager on her cell phone in the bottom panel of this cover with one of the tiny figures in the windows of the previous cover—this second image demands a great deal more of the reader, expecting them to shift seamlessly between two separate time frames and to establish a rough equivalence between the isolation of the old man and this disaffected young woman. Both occupy the same corner of their respective panels, the old man in his childhood years (Ware signals this connection through his use of color as well as narrative contiguity) reading comics as his family is engaged in post-dinner conversation, while the teenager speaks with friends on her cell phone as her family watches a football game on television. The contrast overall is seemingly as stark, literally and figuratively a binary opposition between the warm tones and communion of the earlier scene of familial conversation against the cold, almost antiseptic dining room whose flat screen television disallows conversation in the present-day scene. The palpable nostalgia for the earlier time frame—a putative golden age of both communal values and the comics that the young boy reads—is tempered, however, by the boy’s older brother being away at war. In many respects the “conversation” of the cover’s title is between the two halves of its diptych, a camouflage-clad relative in the bottom center of the present-day panel serving suggestively as an Iraq war analogue of the brother-soldier’s portrait on the side table above.

The third cover, “Family” (fig. 7.3), charts the intersection of these two narratives, the disaffected daughter of the second family singing the praises of the old man’s “emo” quality (“No, seriously—you have to check that guy out! He is so EMO . . . DUDE YOU ARE SO EMO!”) as she passes him in the park outside their home. In doing so, she mistakes his very real melancholy as
an affectation of despondency cultivated by contemporary teens. It is also a
misrecognition of their connections, the dramatic irony allowing the astute
reader to acknowledge that they share a common experience in the same
apartment that transcends their generational differences, a common experi­
ence neither character can begin to recognize.
A similar flattening takes place
elsewhere on this cover in the comparison of her suffering, being subjected to
her mother’s non-vegan stuffing (“I mean, I TOLD her not to use butter in the
stuffing … She has absolutely no respect for me or my political beliefs!”), with
that of slavery (“Well, at least we can be thankful there’s no slavery anymore,
right? I mean, that, like, totally sucked.”). Such professions of hyperbolic teen­
age angst signal the development of her story as an occlusion of the nascent
political critique of the series, shifting instead to the more trivial, everyday
concerns of disaffected youth. Her voice is manifestly one that seeks to undo
the contemplative mood established with respect to the old man, vying with
him for the emotional and hermeneutic center of the entire sequence.
As such, the reader can begin to detect a pattern throughout “Thanks­
giving”: the establishing of a somber storyline—one of loss, loneliness, and
human alienation that elevates comics to such serious subject matter—and
its subsequent interruption and lessening in nearly the same stroke. These
two forces are represented broadly by the two major characters: the old man and the teenager, respectively. This self-disruptive quality characterizes not only the content, but also the form of much of Ware’s work, from his earliest comics for *The Daily Texan* during his college days, where characters have the ability to manipulate the panels into which they are drawn, to his 2000 novel *Jimmy Corrigan*, where its multigenerational storyline abruptly gives way to cut-out dioramas, instructions to the reader, and other extradiegetic interruptions. These disruptions bring into question or disallow the long-form, richly developed storylines aspired toward in contemporary graphic narratives, undercut as they are with the more insensate, adolescent energies conventionally associated with comics.

This pattern is magnified to an almost sublime (or sublimely ridiculous) level in the fourth cover in the sequence, “Main Course,” which penetrates the
consciousness of the pigeons pictured in the previous three covers. Ware slyly signals this thematic, tonal, and metatextual shift in the previous comic by leaving a copy of *The New Yorker* on the apartment's side table that turns out to be the very issue of the magazine represented in this final cover. Indeed, if the movement of the narrative up until this point has been one of increasing interiorization, unfolding narratives, and interconnections between characters by way of an increasingly magnified and sensitive vision, this final gesture holds that vision up to a kind of ridicule. It is a narrative of Penrod the hen-pecked, nebbish pigeon, forced to forage for food on Thanksgiving Day despite his misgivings that the historical violence done to turkeys on the holiday might spill over to all birdkind. Played for laughs, Penrod's fears are nonetheless confirmed in the final panel, when it seems imminent that he will be run down by what is presumably the old man's car (fig. 7.4), his narrative serving as a mise-en-abyme for the sequence's larger leitmotifs.

By acceding more readily to the expectations of comics as they are conventionally understood, "Main Course" ironizes and confronts the barriers that have been traditionally erected to dissociate comics from high cultural prestige. Noted comics theorist Thierry Groensteen has outlined these obstacles, describing what he terms a "four-fold symbolic handicap":

1° [Comic art] is a hybrid, the result of crossbreeding between text and image; 2° Its story-telling ambitions seem to remain on the level of a sub-literature; 3° It has connections to a common and inferior branch of visual art, that of caricature; 4° Even though they are now frequently intended for adults, comics propose nothing other than a return to childhood (Groensteen 2000, 35).

All are characteristic of this fourth cover, in opposition to the previous three. "Main Course" most fully integrates image and text, appearing most recognizably as a comic strip. It emphasizes a more caricatural style, both in its iconographic, starkly rendered forms and in its antic humor that draws on para-literary genres such as sitcoms and vaudeville for its social commentaries (particularly its two-dimensional representation of gender). Indeed, some of Ware's most direct commentaries on the high art tradition—his condensation of art history from cave drawings to postmodernism, "Our History of Art" (originally composed for his inclusion in the 2002 Whitney Biennial), as well as his brief history of literary influence from Homer to Joyce (a cover illustration for *Virginia Quarterly Review's* "Writers on Writers" special issue)—are rendered in similarly caricatural stick figures, the purported
seriousness of the subject deflated by the droll jocularity of the style (Ware 2005, 6–9; Ware 2006b). Penrod’s name also derives from a popular cultural source, Booth Tarkington’s eponymous collection of boys’ stories (as evidenced by the reproduction of the cover of Tarkington’s Penrod in the vast grid of “Leftovers”), one that, like comics themselves, anticipates a youth audience. As such, these allusions purposefully cut across the otherwise high literary references in “Thanksgiving,” including everything from Tolstoy to Chaucer’s story of Chanticleer in the Nun’s Priest’s Tale.

Taken together, the premium placed here on authorly innovation and readerly expectations in these four comics, combined with the ambivalence to contemporary culture, all signal classically modernist concerns. Ware’s very title, The ACME Novelty Library, represents two high modernist anxieties simultaneously: the gesture toward radical originality that is itself a conspicuous archaism (in this case of the palette and line of earlier twentieth-century and Golden-Age-era comics) and the false promises of commercialism in those same comics. Ware ruthlessly parodies capitalist consumption in a series of fake advertisements in The ACME Novelty Library, selling such lugubriously titled merchandise as “Success Brand Snort” and “Genuine Smile.” An ongoing feature of Ware’s is “ Tales of Tomorrow,” which imagines a future world defined entirely by advertising culture, its citizens’ daily routine comprised of navigating a shimmering, unredeemable consumer culture in a perpetual state of buyer’s remorse (Ware 2005, 9, 76, 78, 84, 86, 91–93). Above all else, Ware directs his satirical ire toward this accelerated promise that meaningfulness can be purchased on the cheap in the modern age. More so than his relationship to literary or art historical forebears, it is this deep suspicion of commercially available, success-oriented commodity capitalism that aligns his work in a recognizably modernist trajectory (for other important critical considerations of Ware in terms of modernism, see Prager 2003; Worden 2006).

At the same time, I would argue that Ware, like many modernists before him, recognizes that such an austere distance from commodity culture is impossible. The very engine of Ware’s characteristically fragmented and conspicuously difficult narrative in “Thanksgiving,” the serial cover, is also a consummate marketing strategy. Long used by the comic book industry to boost sales—back issues of these original issues of The New Yorker sold out in days—Ware’s serial covers generate consumerism in their very critique of its practice. Repackaging this narrative as #18½ of The ACME Novelty Library, Ware also reissued these covers in two differing editions, “Lower East Side,” a widely available folio of the four covers, and “Upper East Side,” a limited and signed edition that includes a reproduction of Ware’s sketchbook notes.
during the composition of the “Thanksgiving” series. In a label on the inside cover of the “Lower East Side” edition, Ware writes:

An outrageously expensive edition of this folio in a limited, unfolded impression of 175 with hardcover covers and a facsimile reproduction of the author’s tepid notes and doodles subsequently signed and possibly further defaced by said author himself (i.e., the “Upper East Side” model) is available to interested exclusive parties and nominated individuals willing to pay for the privilege of handling sheets of paper upon which flakes of skin, essential epidermal oils, or perhaps even DNA from the corpus of its artist have briefly made abrasion or even permanent affiliation. Interested parties will please consult thenewyorkerstore.com for further details.¹²

In doing so, he acknowledges, however parodically, the voracious appetites of the comics collector, and the mass-market economic forces of the comics industry more generally, generating the very consumerist tendencies his comics criticize so relentlessly. Treating the author’s body as a reliquary and deploying the language of real estate sales (one all too familiar to the stereotypically monied and leisured reader of The New Yorker), these paratextual claims codify literary value as a function of collectability. In almost Hege- lian fashion, the felt presence of commerce is simultaneously preserved and annulled, the coterie audience so prized by the modernist impulse at the same time revealed to be a symptom of an all-embracing consumer culture.¹³

The same could be said for Ware’s equally acute ambivalence for comics as a medium, which he has described as a “woefully underdeveloped and commercially handicapped narrative form” (Ware 2006a, 7). Indeed, for every exploration of a high-minded, literary theme, Ware’s narratives ensure that those meditations are relentlessly undone. In the online supplement to the previous four covers, a vast composition entitled “Leftovers” offers the backstory to the old man: the death of his brother in 1942, the news of which arrives immediately after the first Thanksgiving celebration pictured in “Conversation.”

In the ironic reversal of the two titles—the most caricatural and seemingly unrelated composition titled “Main Course,” and the most ambitious titled “Leftovers”—Ware signals his characteristic rhetoric of failure, one that persistently inflects his stated goal to write comics with the texture, depth, and sophistication of literary fiction (Ware n.d.). Comics figure centrally as a self-referential motif in this composition, which is an intricate and beautiful
canvas that seeks to visualize and map the workings of the old man's memory. The reader learns that both brothers aspire to be comics artists, a dream cut short by the older brother "outgrowing" comics and enlisting in the military. Several panels of "Leftovers" are devoted to an abortive attempt they made together (in the vein of Shuster and Siegel and other comics creators) to script a comic book of their own, these incomplete pages serving as a testament to the brothers growing apart.

"Leftovers" concludes tragically with the older brother's death, a trauma the reader comes to understand as the cause of the old man's solitary meditation in "Stuffing." Struck by a jeep in a training accident, the brother's death seemingly confirms the tacit war commentary of the second cover, this final contemplation of the human costs of war an apparent ratification of the entire sequence's insistence on the perdurability of trauma and loss. Yet at almost the same stroke, Penrod's slapstick demise, his also being struck by a vehicle, anticipates and flattens the latter tragedy, the unwitting pigeon's death unwriting, to some degree, the tragic resonance of the sequence's end (fig. 7.5). All that remains of the brother at the conclusion of "Leftovers" is a letter that arrives after his death, one illustrated with the comics he had forsaken as a child. Both mute reminder of his loss and insignificant register of his life, these final caricatures are wholly incommensurate to the tragedy of his death. Comics are thus both the medium through which his life is so beautifully told and remembered, as well as the insufficient residue of that very life.

Resisting even this final word on the narrative of loss, however, Ware reanimates his world-weary teenager in the collected "Thanksgiving" folio in an epilogue titled "3mpir3stat3.jpg." In doing so, he continues to oscillate between his somber septuagenarian and his blithely uncaring teenager, between narratives of a literary texture and their subsequent unraveling. In the manner of "Leftovers," this final composition follows a day in her life, as recorded in her own voice as she updates her MySpace page. Again, her dialog undoes whatever pretension the comics sequence might have toward literariness. She writes, "OMG I am so xcited . . . today I discovered sugar-free pudding at only 35 cals per cup && I am now like, feeling so good about myself," and several panels later, "I'm just so upset that my family has no respect for me or my personal space at all!! I mean is it really too much to ask?? && then they have to make everything so supremely gross by commenting on things that are none of their fucking business, OK??!! & & if their [sic] reading this right now then they deserve it bcz this is really none of their business, understand??!! NOYFB!!" Clearly, the fickleness of her emotional state and
CHRIS WARE'S GRAPHIC NARRATIVES AS LITERATURE

her dialog punctuated with visible typographical errors and text-message contractions places into question whatever sympathy the reader might have for her presumed difficulties. The specific bone of contention in this passage is a cell phone picture she has taken of the Empire State Building, one complimented on by her father and reproduced on the recto of “3mpir3stat3.jpg.” As the tone has shifted from the old man’s heart-wrenching memories to the teenager’s banal gripes, so too has the visual focus of this final composition shifted from his comics to her digital photos.

It is tempting to read this transition as an evacuation of meaning in the present day, a narrative of degeneration in everything from “family values” to the care, craft, and attention paid to contemporary visual media. Yet, allegories of authorship are present in both the old man’s comics and the teenager’s digital photos. Ware’s finished comics incorporate both exquisitely hand-drawn compositions and digital coloring, a hybridity shrewdly alluded to in the image-within-an-image composition of the Empire State Building (fig. 7.6). In turn, this image was originally designed by Ware for the October 3, 2005, cover of The New Yorker, yet another intersection in Ware’s history with the magazine and a powerful point of comparison between Ware’s teenager and her creator.

As relentlessly as its narrator is held up to scorn, “3mpir3stat3.jpg” concludes with a quite genuine sense of loneliness and anomie, one shared with the old man in “Leftovers.” “I am walking around in this house,” writes the teenager, “feeling like a total ghost . . . like I died, or, (even better) like I’d never been born.” The panels correspond with these sentiments, silently surveying the empty expanses of her apartment and the surrounding buildings, recalling the very first image of the sequence, “Stuffing.” Indeed, despite the differences between them, these two characters are unexpectedly brought together in this final gesture. Ware’s draft notes reveal his intention to bring these characters into a more proximate relationship with one another—“That is what I want to be, right there,” she states in discarded dialog, “the lonely old pigeon guy . . . Where do I apply?”—her character going so far as to claim “I think I was a lonely old pigeon guy in another life.”

Likewise, for all the self-flagellating doubts about the putative value of comics as the means of literary sophistication, these characters’ proximity also calls into question those very doubts. The narrative of “3mpir3stat3.jpg” turns on the fate of an image: the teenager and Ware’s rendition of the Empire State Building. Mortified though she is by her father’s praise of her photograph, the comic suspends the reader’s knowledge of whether or not the file is deleted at narrative’s end, picturing a deletion prompt with the “save” function highlighted. The dialectic of preservation and annulment that is at
the core of the entire “Thanksgiving” sequence comes to a head here, concluding with a final gesture toward the preservation of the image: the teenager continuing to snap photos in the comic’s final panel. It is one of these pictures that presumably occupies the second half of the recto of “3mpir3stat3.jpg,” a companion nightscape of the Empire State Building that stands alongside the imperiled original. For all of its missed connections and reversals, its ambivalence about the power of the comics medium as literature, “Thanksgiving” thus ends on a final note of possibility in the virtues of the visual.

This unwriting, this working at odds with itself, I argue, is the hallmark not only of Ware’s work, but of an entire generation of graphic novelists who aspire to the status of literature. It is a rhetoric of failure, one of conspicuous difficulty and willed ambivalence learned from literary modernism and extending both its intellectual anxieties and intellectual rewards (see Ball for a more complete investigation of Ware’s use of the rhetoric of failure). Early in his career, Ware stated in an interview: “If one wants to tell stories that have the richness of life, [comics’] vocabulary is extremely limited. It’s like trying to use limericks to make literature” (Kidd 1997, 43). Acknowledging the tensions articulated here—between comics and literature, mass culture and high art—and the slipperiness of these very distinctions remains the linchpin for beginning to discuss the role of graphic narratives in the literary canon. Doing so will not only make important shifts to our understanding of comics as a vehicle for intellectual work, but will also place Chris Ware at the center of that renewed appreciation.

NOTES

I have benefited greatly from conversations and debates with students, colleagues, and friends about my interpretation of Ware’s work, including audiences at Dickinson College, Princeton University, and the narrative fiction panel on the theme of “text and image” at the 2007 Modern Language Association conference. I am particularly indebted to my conversations with Martha Kuhlman, Elizabeth Lee, and Benjamin Widiss.

1. Nomenclature has proven a vexed question for comics/comix/graphic novel/graphic narrative scholars, as discussed in the introduction. Without going into exhaustive detail, “comics” is the preferred term by contemporary authors in the medium to distinguish their distinctive use of words and pictures presented in sequence to give the illusion of temporal and spatial progression. By the term “graphic narrative,” I mean to indicate the recent trend of comics artists to produce comics with the weight and import of literary fiction, including much of the nonfictional and short-form work for which the term “graphic novel” proves overly narrow.
2. My focus here on Ware’s import to literary history and periodization is not meant to discount the other disciplines with which his work makes important interventions: art history, architecture, American music, and so forth. For the full range of Ware’s reach into these contiguous fields, see Ball and Kuhlman 2010.

3. The terms “modernism” and “postmodernism” have generated decades of critical debate and volumes of exegetical labors. My investment in these terms for the purposes of this essay is in tracing the American literary canon’s shifting investment in popular cultural and mass media emanations. For a particularly lucid explanation of the modern/postmodern distinction, and its many complications, see Harvey 1990.

4. The most recent edition of The Heath Anthology of American Literature (Volume E Contemporary Period: 1945 to the Present) has followed suit, including graphic narratives by Spiegelman, Barry, Alison Bechdel, Joe Sacco, and Ware himself.

5. For the most part, the proximity between Herriman’s work (and the early-twentieth-century corpus of American comics more generally) and the aesthetic and intellectual achievements of American modernism has gone largely unrecognized by both literary and comics scholars. An important exception to this critical neglect is Inge 1990, 41–57. Contemporary graphic novelists, however, have shown a keen and fanciful interest in revisiting these intersections. See Jason 2006; Bertozzi 2007.

6. Rudolph Dirks was not the only comics-author-cum-fine-artist in this period with reach into the emerging discourse of modernism. George Luks, another member of the ashcan school and author of The Yellow Kid (which was continued in Joseph Pulitzer’s The New York World when Richard Outcault was hired by William Randolph Hearst’s rival publication The New York Journal), also had works exhibited in the Armory Show of 1913. For the creative interplay between fine art and comics, see Zurier 2006, 181–245. Lyonel Feininger also straddled the two worlds of comics and artistic modernism, drawing the short-lived strips The Kin-der Kids and Wee Willie Winkie’s World (in The Chicago Tribune between the years of 1906 and 1907), both of which are notable for a graphic experimentation that informed Feininger’s artistic career. See the sections on Feininger in Carlin, Karasik, and Walker 2005, 37–41, 187–93.

7. Unless indicated otherwise, all quotations and figures are from this edition. Limitations of space and the cost of reproduction preclude reproducing this sequence in its entirety, and without this visual reference many of the claims I make here will lose their full force. As this volume is going to press, high-quality scans of these comics can also be seen at the “ACME Novelty Archive” website, an unofficial yet highly valuable treasure trove of Ware’s work. See http://www.acmenoveltyarchive.org/item.php?item_no=556 [accessed 24 June 2008]. The entire series, minus “3mpir3stat3.jpg,” has also been reprinted in Houghton Mifflin’s Best American Comics 2008.

8. Ware himself has used Nabokov’s interviews on literature as an analogue to his own theories of graphic composition. See the epigraphs to his introductory essay in McSweeney’s #13.


10. The most common etymology of “emo” is as a contraction for “emotional hardcore,” a genre of brooding punk rock acts whose fans cultivate an introspective, angst-ridden aesthetic that conveys a similarly dissociative world view.
11. The focus on missed human connections, especially with respect to shared architectural spaces, can be said to be a leitmotif of Ware's entire oeuvre. *Jimmy Corrigan* turns at the end on the revelation, withheld from both the main characters and the inattentive reader, that the title character is genealogically related to the adopted daughter of his until-recently-absent father, a revelation that raises knotty questions of genealogy, race, and family history acknowledged only obliquely within the frame of the narrative. Similarly, Ware's novel-in-progress, "Building Stories"—published variously in the *Chicago Reader* (2002–2006), *The New York Times Magazine* (2005–2006), and *The ACME Novelty Library* #16 and 18—relates the interconnected lives of tenants in the same Chicago brownstone, yet refuses an acknowledgment of those connections to his characters.

12. Purchasers of “Upper East Side” are likewise reassured: “A 'street' version of this portfolio, in which the mass-produced images are carelessly folded and bent into a cardboard wrapper nowhere approaching the exquisite beauty and drawing room graciousness of this edition (to say nothing of being shrinkwrapped and made available to commoners in bookshops and kiosks with no eye toward protecting their patronage’s investments or liquid assets) / (i.e., the 'Lower East Side' model) / is available to interested art students, layreaders and those who simply don’t appreciate the finer things in life and whose interests are transitory, easily flummoxed or otherwise capricious.”

13. That Ware's other novel-in-progress, "Rusty Brown," takes as its main characters two comics collectors indicates the degree of Ware’s interest in laying bare the economic substrate of his chosen medium. See *The ACME Novelty Library* #16, 17, and 19. Ware himself is an avid and accomplished collector, the connections between his work and his collections serving as the organizing theme of his inclusion in the 2008 exhibition “ReSOURCE” at the Hite Art Institute of the University of Louisville. See Linn 2008.

WORKS CITED


Chute, Hillary, and Marianne DeKoven, eds. 2006. *Modern Fiction Studies Special Issue: Graphic Narrative* 52(4).


———. 2006b. Cover illustration. The Virginia Quarterly Review Special Issue: Writers on Writers.


