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Neil Gaiman: a portrait of the artist as a disciple of Alan Moore

by Cyril Camus

Neil Gaiman has recounted in many interviews (e.g. Bender 2000: 15-18) how Alan Moore's *Swamp Thing* rekindled his interest for comics in his adulthood, and how Moore was then led to personally teach him how to format a comics-script, and gave him some feedback on his first attempts. As regards the influence that Moore may have had on Gaiman's comics-writing, the elements which both authors usually acknowledge are practical and extra-fictional: the habit of writing very long and detailed scripts (Bender 2000: 9), and that of writing according to the artists' tastes, and to what they are best at drawing.¹ However, though their respective fictional worlds are different in tone and atmosphere, some of their features are also common to both, from their extended practice of integrative fiction or metafiction to their pervasive concern with mythology, both as mere intertext or as a model for their brand of fantasy or superhero stories. Yet, care needs to be taken regarding the identification of Moore's legacy in Gaiman's fiction. As Umberto Eco showed in his essay 'Borges and my Anxiety of Influence', the complexity of the working of influence makes it virtually impossible to assert categorically the one source or model of an idea, even when the influence is explicitly acknowledged:

When we speak of a relationship of influence between two authors, A and B, we are in one of two situations:

(1) A and B were contemporaries. [...]

(2) A came before B, as was the case with the two writers discussed in the last few days [i.e. Borges and Eco], so the debate is concerned only with the influence of A on B. Nevertheless, one cannot speak of influence in literature, in philosophy, or even in scientific research, if one does not place an X at the top of the triangle. Shall we call this X culture, the chain of previous influences? [...]

In any case, the diagram is not quite so simple, because in addition to A, B, and the sometimes millennial chain of culture represented by X, there is also the *Zeitgeist*. (Eco 2006: 118-120)

Given this complexity, other factors besides Moore's influence may be significant. Whilst this article cannot account for all that is implied by Eco's comments, some key points will be mentioned as the following lines explore various ways in which Gaiman's work relates to Moore's.

The best work to begin with is probably Gaiman's comics-series *Sandman* (1988-1996). One of the ways in which it can be described is as an integrative diegesis, that is, a diegesis engulfing other diegeses. Indeed, apart from Gaiman's characters, it features mythological and sacred characters from various religious traditions, characters from the DC Universe, characters who are both at the same time, fairy characters from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (c. 1594-1596), and fictionalized versions of historical personalities. All that forms a giant mixture which is shot through with metafictional passages that make it, in many ways, and in Stephen Rauch's words, 'a story about stories' (Rauch 2003: 118). *Sandman* is Gaiman's richest integrative diegesis, but not his only one. For example, his 2003 short story 'A Study in Emerald' makes Sherlock Holmes meet the Great Old Ones. His 2008 novel, *The Graveyard Book*, also features cameo appearances of creatures out of Lovecraft's writings amidst a diegesis which can otherwise be more strictly attributed to Gaiman.

Of course, two of Moore's major works are integrative diegeses: *Lost Girls* (1991-2006) and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (started in 1999). Apart from their integrative nature, two other similarities, between *Sandman*'s diegesis and the *League*'s, can be noted.

Firstly, apart from the characters from various novels, romances, satires, plays, short stories, and films who meet in the League, its cosmological background also integrates mythological gods. This is explained at the beginning of the Black Dossier (2007), in a prose insert by Oliver Haddo, the intra-diegetic occultist borrowed from a novel by Somerset Maugham. Secondly, just like Sandman, the League sometimes grows metafictional, and explicitly states its purposes as being the boundless celebration of human imagination, as in Shakespeare's Prospero's address to the reader at the end of the Black Dossier.

Admittedly, the first issue of Sandman was published before *Lost Girls* and *The League*'s, but Gaiman wrote Sandman until 1996. The example of *Lost Girls* was therefore already partly accessible in print before the end of the series. Arguing for a strict relationship of influence from Moore on Gaiman in this instance seems difficult, but a cross-fertilization of ideas between these two colleagues, friends and sometimes collaborators, with a very similar cultural background, seems more than probable. More importantly, *Lost Girls* and *The League* were not the first times Moore expressed his interest in the principle of integrative fiction. The first recorded time was in 1987, in his introduction for the first *Swamp Thing* collection, in a passage which could be as good an introduction to Sandman, *Lost Girls* or *The League*, as it is to *Swamp Thing*:

The continuity-expert's nightmare of a thousand different super-powered characters coexisting in the same continuum can, with the application of a sensitive and sympathetic eye, become a rich and fertile mythic background with fascinating archetypal characters hanging around, waiting to be picked like grapes on the vine. Yes, of course, the whole idea is utterly inane, but to let its predictable inanities blind you to its truly fabulous and breathtaking aspects is to do both oneself and the genre a disservice.

Imagine for a moment a universe jeweled with alien races ranging from the transcendently divine to the loathsomely Lovecraftian. Imagine a cosmos where the ancient gods still exist somewhere and where whole dimensions are populated by anthropomorphic funny animals. Where Heaven and Hell are demonstrably real and even accessible, and where angels and demons alike seem to walk the earth with impunity. Imagine a planet where exposure to dangerous radiation granted the gift of super-speed rather than bone cancer, and where the skies were thus filled by flying men and women threatening to blot out the sun. Imagine a place where people were terribly good or terribly bad, with little room for the mediocre in between. No, it certainly wouldn't look very much like the world we live in, but that doesn't mean it couldn't be every bit as glorious, touching, sad or scary. (Moore 1987: 9)

Moore's work was then, if not a direct inspiration for Gaiman's, at least the work of a forerunner, of which Gaiman was very much aware since *Swamp Thing* had, generally speaking, such a tremendous impact on Gaiman's work in general, and particularly on Sandman (as it shall appear later on in this article). In Eco's terms, Moore may be A to a certain extent, and Gaiman B, but there also is an identifiable X (acknowledged by both Gaiman and Moore), and some remarks can be made concerning Moore and Gaiman's common zeitgeist. X is Philip Jose Farmer. He wrote, in the 1970s, interrelated novels which were the foundations of an ongoing multi-authored integrative diegesis in progress known as the 'Wold Newton Universe'. Farmer established a genealogical framework according to which various characters from popular literature were relatives. Since then, many academics, professional authors and amateurs have been writing articles and stories expanding on his work. Moore acknowledged his debt to Farmer in an interview for the webzine *Newsarama*, calling him 'a seminal influence upon the League' (Smith: 2009), and Gaiman claims both Farmer's and Moore's tutelage, but specifically for 'A Study in Emerald':

As a boy I had loved Philip Jose Farmer's Wold Newton stories, in which dozens of characters from fiction were incorporated into one coherent world, and I had greatly enjoyed watching my friends Kim Newman and Alan Moore build their own Wold Newton-descended worlds in the Anno Dracula sequence and The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen respectively. It looked like fun. I wondered if I could try something like that. (Gaiman 2006: 5)

The importance of intertextuality and metafiction in this narrative practice has often led commentators to call Gaiman and Moore 'postmodernist' comics-writers. However, even if the postmodernist stance can account for intertextual and metafictional tastes, there is another model, specific to their common zeitgeist, which accounts just as well for the development of the idea of integrative fiction. Blending diegeses was always part of popular fiction practices, under the more prosaic name of 'crossover'. Most importantly, it is a widespread practice in mainstream comics. The commercial crossovers between company series in DC and Marvel publications have led to the establishment of two integrative diegeses whose intertextual material is whatever the company legally owns: the DC Universe and the Marvel Universe. Besides, though Gaiman and Moore have both worked in various media, comics have always been at the centre of their creative interests. So the logics of integrative fiction could intervene very much in the shaping of their respective creativities, and approaches to storytelling.

Another aspect of Gaiman's writing that cannot be ignored is his constant use and rewriting of mythological hypotexts. Besides the mythological characters in Sandman, he also created an integrative diegesis which is only mythological in nature, a 'mythological crossover', in his novel American Gods (2001). He also wrote, among other examples, three different versions of the legend of Beowulf, and a book for children based on Norse myths. Mythology usually seems to be dealt with very similarly to Lovecraftian or comics hypotexts. As mentioned in the 'Gaiman encyclopedia', Prince of Stories: '[...] unlike many people Neil Gaiman never seems to have made a distinction between the myths of the ancient Greeks and the four-color DC comics gods he grew up reading about' (Wagner 2008: 264). This can probably be explained partly because, as documented in The Sandman Companion (Bender 2000: 13), a piece of superhero comics based on mythological intertextuality – Jack Kirby's The Mighty Thor – started Gaiman's interest in myths.

Apart from this, and his readings of Roger Lancelyn Green's Myths of the Norsemen (1960) and Tales of Ancient Egypt (1967), Samuel R. Delany's The Einstein Intersection (1967) or Robert Holdstock's Mythago Wood (1984), another experience, in the early 1990s, may be counted as an interesting stage in his creative relationship with myths and popular fiction alike. In 'Olympus', the third storyline of Alan Moore's 1980s revival of the British superhero Marvelman/Miracleman, the heroes do what American classics like Superman have famously never done. They permanently take off their human guises, abandon the game of cat and mice with petty criminals, and instate a world utopia, where crime, famine, poverty, war and all the universal plights of humanity are simply abolished. In these comics, the captions feature first-person narration by Miracleman himself, which constantly equate him and his companions with Greek or Norse mythological gods. Moore wasn't the first superhero comics-writer or popular writer to emphasize the mythological legacy of modern heroic fiction, but he was a pioneer in writing a self-reflexive superhero comics-series, with characters stating themselves their intertextual ties with mythology.

When Moore proposed him to 'take over writing Miracleman,' Gaiman had not even started to work on Sandman. As he points out himself, he was a beginner, with only one comic-book completed and not yet published (Khoury 2001: 118). Besides, his first

Miracleman issues would appear in print in 1990, the same year as 'Season of Mists', his first Sandman storyline featuring mythological characters. From Gaiman's account of their conversation (Ibid.), readers can gather that Moore conceived his mythical utopia as an environment where 'no further story [could occur].' This was, of course, simply not true, and Gaiman perfectly understood that, as Samuel R. Delany's chosen examples among Gaiman's Miracleman stories clearly show:

What could possibly happen that was true and real in a world like Miracleworld? Go ahead: You have to ask it. But Gaiman goes so easily into that world, to overhear the after-love conversation of a young man with memories of meeting with divinity, or the indiscreet revelations a superbaby might make to her all-too-human mother, that, when the performance is over, the reader can hardly remember why the task once seemed so daunting. (Delany 1999: 364-365).

No further superhero story, or action/adventure story, could occur, but stories about interactions between humanity and the numinous definitely could. So could stories about humanity trying, and failing, to adjust to the presence of myths incarnate. Moore had hinted, at the end of 'Olympus', at the question of whether myths incarnate (Miracleman and his friends) could adjust to the complexity of humanity. It is a pity that Gaiman could not explore further that facet of 'Miracleworld', because of Eclipse Comics's bankruptcy. Yet, one should be aware that he eventually did explore fully that question, in Sandman: which ended up being the story of the grim Lord of Dreams desperately trying to adjust to the humanity over whose imaginative life he presides. Such poignant paradoxes would become a recurrent feature of Gaiman's treatment of mythological material. His novel American Gods is, among other things, the melancholy drama of forgotten gods forced into ordinary, human lives. Its 2005 spin-off, Anansi Boys, puts a fresh perspective on the topos of the father-and-son relationship, thanks to the complication of having an African trickster god as a father. If the constant tie between mythology, popular fiction and Gaiman's work can claim many different incentives, the opportunity he had to follow up 'Olympus' must surely be counted among those incentives.

Some of Gaiman's comics can also be defined by their direct intertextual link with Moore's works. His 1988 miniseries Black Orchid, for instance, was supposed to be a specific re-vamp of an old, unsuccessful and forgotten super-heroine created by writer Sheldon Mayer and artist Tony DeZuniga in 1973. It ended up being also an extension of the sylvan mythology Moore had roughed out in his Swamp Thing run.

Moore's run is well-known for the dramatic changes it introduced in the characterization of Swamp Thing. From its creation in 1971, the character had been defined as a human scientist who had been transformed into a vegetal monster by an accidental explosion in his swamp-based lab. In Moore's 1983 issue 'The Anatomy Lesson', he completely turned the tide, by revealing that Swamp Thing was actually a vegetal creature, with nothing human about it, but which had absorbed traces of the man's consciousness. From Berni Wrightson and Len Wein's classic abject monster, Moore had transformed Swamp Thing into something which is beyond humanity and abnormality, which is 'wholly other' and therefore corresponds to the aspect of the 'numinous' called the 'mysterium' by theologian Rudolf Otto (Otto 1958: 25-30). Then, Moore moved it even further into the realm of the numinous, the magical and the symbolic, by defining it progressively as a plant elemental, a mythological Guardian of the Earth.

While working on Black Orchid, Gaiman decided to characterize her as a hybrid of human and flower (thus finally explaining her never-justified superhero name). Then, from

the ideas Moore had scattered in his Swamp Thing comics, he began delineating a cohesive mythological background to all the vegetal characters of the DC Universe. A common university history was therefore attributed to Alec Holland (Swamp Thing), Jason Woodrue (The Floronic Man), Pamela Isley (Poison Ivy), and Gaiman's character Philip Sylvian, creator of Black Orchid. Then a new concept was introduced, 'may queen', in addition to Moore's 'Erl-Kings', 'Parliament of Trees' or 'the Green'. Finally, Gaiman wrote an addendum, a prose text entitled 'Notes Towards a Vegetable Theology', that clearly defines and explains that sylvan cosmological order. Though unpublished by DC Comics, this addendum aimed, according to Gaiman, to "align the various vegetable set-ups within the DC universe, and throw in a few things to make it fun and codifiable, while still leaving room open for other people to create within it" (Wagner 2008: 191).

Other elements of Swamp Thing make their way into Gaiman's work. Most notably, Abel and Cain, who were mere heterodiegetic horror-hosts in their respective original titles, and were first made homodiegetic by Moore, in Swamp Thing, eventually become dwellers of the Dreaming in Sandman. Furthermore, Moore's conception of Hell, as a place where the souls of the dead choose to go, because they want to be punished, is recycled in Sandman and Superman/Green Lantern: Legend of the Green Flame (written in 1988; graphically completed and published in 2000).

The title of Gaiman's 2009 *Batman: Whatever Happened to the Caped Crusader?* is modelled on Moore's 1986 *Superman: Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?* The title was actually the idea of some DC executives, as Gaiman explains in his introduction to the Deluxe edition: 'In my head, the story was simply called *Batman: the End*, but the first time DC Comics people talked about it, they described it as "Whatever Happened to the Caped Crusader?" and the title sort of stuck' (Gaiman 2009: 6). However, that paratextual allusion was partly inspired by the similarities between the two projects.

Moore's story was the 'end' of Superman stories as they had been featured in the periodicals *Superman* and *Action Comics* since the creation of the character in 1938. The two series were to be replaced by other comics featuring a reinvented Superman universe. This has to do with a characteristic practice of superhero comics, described by Umberto Eco in his famous 1962 article 'The Myth of Superman'. According to Eco, to be able to maintain Superman's publication forever if the sales allowed it, the various writers involved created a discontinuous species of storytelling that avoided alluding to any chronology. That made the character's never ageing, never dying or never even changing more verisimilar for the reader:

If [a given story] took Superman up again at the point where he left off, he would have taken a step toward death. On the other hand, to begin a story without showing that another had preceded it would manage, momentarily, to remove Superman from the law that leads from life to death through time [...]. The stories develop in a kind of oneiric climate—of which the reader is not aware at all—where what has happened before and what has happened after appear extremely hazy. (Eco 1984: 114)

The aspect of this narrative strategy which is most relevant to Moore's story is the device of "Imaginary Stories", which Eco describes as a way of telling all the possible stories about Superman without having to acknowledge the changes entailed by those stories, because they are presented as 'Imaginary' (Eco 1984: 114-115). Moore's story has a very peculiar position in that ontological hierarchy. In *Superman* and *Action Comics*, it is absolutely real, and it is the end of Superman's adventures. In the subsequent DC publications, it is imaginary, and so is every previous story. At the beginning of Moore's story, a caption addresses that peculiar status in this self-reflexive statement:

This is an IMAGINARY STORY (which may never happen, but then again may) about a perfect man who came from the sky and did only good. It tells of his twilight, when the great battles were over and the great miracles long performed; of how his enemies conspired against him and of that final war in the snowblind wastes beneath the Northern Lights; of the women he loved and of the choice he made between them; of how he broke his most sacred oath, and how finally all the things he had were taken from him save for one. It ends with a wink. It begins in a quiet midwestern town, one summer afternoon in the quiet midwestern future. Away in the big city, people still sometimes glance up hopefully from the sidewalks, glimpsing a distant speck in the sky... but no: it's only a bird, only a plane. Superman died ten years ago. This is an IMAGINARY STORY... Aren't they all? (Moore 2009: 11)

By addressing the absurdities of the character's publishing history, Moore makes them become creative ambiguities: the events are foretold in an assertive modality that contradicts the warning that the story is imaginary... Then the final comment—'Aren't they all?'—puts this 'Imaginary story' on the same level of actuality as the 'real' ones, since every single one of Superman's adventures is, technically speaking, a piece of fiction. The story is also endowed with a narrator who seems to be denounced as unreliable by some aspects of the framing narrative. The embedded narrative tells us that Superman committed suicide, but that narrative is told to a journalist, ten years after the events, by a now married Lois Lane. In the framing narrative, Lois's husband and son are featured, and, though the text in the speech balloons characterize the husband as an ordinary workingman, many visual elements, as well as the structural development of the dialogue, suggest that he is most probably Superman, who has faked his own death to be able to live an ordinary married life with Lois. The fact is never explicitly stated, though, only strongly suggested, and this ambiguity makes the story much more than a mere dramatic grand finale for the superhero.

Gaiman's story has the same uneasy ontological status, as to the DC Universe. It appeared in the 'last' issues of the original versions of Batman (started in 1940) and Detective Comics (started in 1937). The Batman adventures published afterwards were to reinvent the character. Just like Moore's, Gaiman's story deals metafictionally with the mainstream comics business of 'Imaginary Stories'. The story relates Batman's funeral. His friends and foes successively tell the story of his death, but the cause is never the same in the various stories. Sometimes, the tales are contradictory: in Alfred's tale, the villains of the Batman mythos never existed. Alfred, and some actors of his friends, created and impersonated them to entertain the depressed Bruce Wayne after his parents' death. Of course, while Alfred tells this story, he is surrounded by the actual villains, who, by their mere presence, invalidate it. That metafiction is even more explicit than Moore's since it stages and juxtaposes instances of the process of making 'Imaginary Stories' that both disrupt and maintain the temporal immutability of periodical superhero fiction. What Moore gave us was the brightest and most cunning possible dénouement. Gaiman's story is rather about the impossibility for Batman to ever give up the fight, as stated by his ghost in the story (Gaiman 2009: 54-56). So the two metafictional stories end up being symbolic opposites, whose metafictional statements fit their respective characters. Moore's stresses the serenity and brightness attached to the Messianic figure of Superman, whereas Gaiman's highlights the relentlessness of its vigilante protagonist, a 'survivor', who will 'be around long after all of us are gone', and whose stories 'don't end with smiles and winks' the way Moore's Superman finale did (Gaiman 2009: 6). So the two stories can be read as complementary volumes in the histories of the two most important DC characters, and it is the way they have been promoted: Moore's story had already been collected in a single volume in 1997, but the publication of Gaiman's collected volume, in 2009, was accompanied by a reprint of Moore's story, in an edition whose design is similar to Gaiman's.

Fellow English comics-writers Alan Moore and Neil Gaiman were among the main creators who contributed, through the mid and late 1980s and the early 1990s, to the ushering in of the self-reflexive, more complex and multi-layered trends of semi-experimental storytelling and sensitive social awareness that are so pervasive in American popular (i.e. fantasy and superhero) fiction today. Movie hits like M. Night Shyamalan's *Unbreakable* (2000), Brad Bird's *The Incredibles* (2004), Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* (2008) or Matthew Vaughn's *Kick-Ass* (2010; adapted from Mark Millar and John Romita Jr's comics-series) owe much to the awe-inspiring models of Moore's *Watchmen* and Moore and Gaiman's *Miracleman*. Moore and Gaiman's parallel and interrelated oeuvres are even more relevant to the understanding of the Vertigo line of dark fantasy, which was engineered as a DC imprint through the 1990s by editor Karen Berger and various British writers such as Garth Ennis and Grant Morrison. Comics like Ennis's *Preacher* (1995-2000) or Morrison's *The Invisibles* (1994-2000) virtually abandoned the naive legacy of mainstream superhero fiction to blend the rich motifs of modern horror literature, of rock music, pagan and hermetic symbolism, political and religious satire. And this distinctive Vertigo mood clearly (and notoriously) evolved from the twin models of Moore's *Swamp Thing* and Gaiman's *Sandman*. For all these reasons, the study of the two authors' respective works from the perspective of the exploration of their creative relationship does not only confirm Moore's status as an extremely influential innovator, or provide interesting insights in the rich intertextual background of Gaiman's creations: it is also likely to illuminate many aspects of contemporary popular fiction studies in general.

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¹ 'About twenty years ago, Alan Moore told me that when you write for specific artists you should write for them, and no-one else, play to their strengths, stretch them. "It makes you look good," he explained.' Neil Gaiman, 'Introduction' (McCabe 2004: 3).