



Alan Moore and the Migrating Art of Comics.

a Conversation with Anna Lisa Di Liddo

by Nicoletta Vallorani

ANNALISA DI LIDDO holds a Phd in English Literary Studies from the University of Milan, Italy. Besides working in Milan, she spent time teaching and researching the intersection between contemporary literature and visual studies – with special attention to comics and children’s books – in Trento (Italy), Columbus, OH (USA), and Toronto (Canada). She currently freelances as a translator of fiction (among the authors she translated into Italian: Angela Carter, Arthur Machen, Doris Lessing) and scripts, and as a consultant for publishing houses. Her publications include contributions to *Rappresentare la Shoah* (2005), *Cityscapes: Islands of the Self* (2007), *A Comics Studies Reader* (2008), and *Acoma Graphic Novel* (2009). *Alan Moore* is her first monograph.

“When an author is so prolific and encyclopaedic in both style and content, selectivity becomes crucial for the scholar to avoid shallowness or stereotypes”.

This consideration appears in the first pages of *Alan Moore. Comics as Performance, Fiction as Scalpel*, authored by Annalisa Di Liddo, and it states, clearly and unmistakably, the main difficulty in analysing Moore’s artistic production: you need a definite approach and some criteria to select what you consider to be the main aspect of a multifaceted artistic experience that is still developing today. Di Liddo, quite a young researcher and yet a familiar profile for people dealing with comics and graphic novel, works on two basic concepts – metafiction and intertextuality – to construct a convincing approach, successfully comparing Moore to such literary author as Charles Dickens and Angela Carter. In short, Di Liddo works, through Alan Moore, on the relationship between reading comics and other forms of literacy.

The research ground is slippery. On the one hand, comics have often been considered as unworthy of serious investigation. On the other, they have been recently



capturing the interest of scholars and researchers, triggering a host of critical approaches that are now developing as academic studies. This is all the more true when the artist at stake is Alan Moore, eclectic talent, living according to his own measure and in his own word, and often collaborating with some of the most interesting artists on the British and American current scene. His most famous narratives – *V for Vendetta*, *Watchmen*, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, *From Hell* – have been widely circulated and debated. And they have been adapted for cinema, often with Moore rejecting the resulting films. His interest in psychogeography, often coupled with ritual and magic practice, produces a very particular feeling about space, both physical and psychological, that has also resulted in interesting collaboration with other contemporary artists. And his whole work is quite a riddle that Di Liddo tries – successfully – to approach.

N. Vallorani: *Graphic novel and migration: would you say the two concepts are related?*

A. Di Liddo: In a way, yes. For the way it is conceived and considering how it developed, the graphic novel can be defined as a migrating genre indeed. Comics in general have actually been constantly migrating as a medium. As you say, words migrate towards the realm of the images and vice versa, thus creating a unique mixture of both: the comics reader's appreciation of the page stems from his/her continuous shifting and balancing between left-brained perception - which apprehends words - and right-brained perception - which apprehends images and symbols. The hybrid nature of the medium has always steered it towards instability and experimentation, thus making it a constantly changing entity.

N. Vallorani: *So you would say the concept of migration is inbuilt in the practice of graphic novel ...*

A. Di Liddo: To a certain extent, yes, though I would add something more. Apart from this 'technically innate', so to say, migrating or shifting quality, the success that the graphic novel both as an aesthetic and a merchandise category has experienced over the past few years – first in the early Nineties, and then very recently – has led the medium toward a further migration, i.e. the migration from cultural periphery to the canon. Of course in the past there had already been underground comics and more mainstream comics and there were critics and scholars who pointed out the worth of many comic books, but what is happening right now is that a very marked change in the reception of comics is finally taking place. Just to mention a few very recent examples from the English-speaking world, the *Times Literary Supplement* started issuing graphic novel reviews in July 2009; *Studies in Comics*, a new academic journal with an excellent editorial committee, is to be launched in early 2010; the V&A museum in London is promoting its comics library collection and issuing a 10,000 pounds scholarship to have a comic artist in residence each year from now; the US branch of Penguin Classics has had its covers and inside flaps illustrated by renowned comics artists like Art Spiegelman, Daniel Clowes,



Lynda Barry and Chris Ware since 2007. Not to mention the late revival in films based on comic books... I could go on with many other examples. So even though the notion of 'canon' nowadays is not really perceived as adequate or necessary anymore, I think we can claim that comics are definitely entering a dimension where they are generally perceived as valid and culturally relevant contributions to contemporary art.

N. Vallorani: *This may have encouraged you in persisting on the project of your book. I mean, this flourishing in the field of studies of comics and the parallel increased popularity of the genre, at least in the English-speaking world.*

A. Di Liddo: Yes, particularly the idea that I could work in a field eventually considered as worthwhile and deserving serious research. This notion had its importance in triggering the project for the book. I realized that there was a wide field of study that still needed to be explored, especially in Italy where the academia had not yet shown a great deal of interest in criticism related to comics. The other key elements in elaborating the plan for the book were of course my personal passion for comics as a medium and my liking for Moore as a writer and artist, but also my background as a scholar of English Literary Studies.

N. Vallorani: *So Moore's grounding in the literary tradition was, so to speak, the root of your project.*

A. Di Liddo: I would say it provided many hints at how to approach a very eclectic and interesting talent. Moore is very much a literary writer. His use of intertextuality is in fact of a crossover kind, in that he tends to blend several forms of art: not only literature but also film, painting, music, the theatre and so on. But the presence of literary quotations, allusions and connections is particularly pervasive in his work.

N. Vallorani: *Migration again: literature migrating into comics, and relating with the art of words and drawings ...*

A. Di Liddo: Exactly. This pressed me to consider the peculiar relationship Moore establishes with his literary references in his fiction and the way they are transformed through the medium of comics via parody and re-signification. This is the reason why I devoted some parts of the book to investigating the way Moore deals with the influence of such authors as Charles Dickens, William Shakespeare, Bram Stoker, and many other novelists, including Raymond Williams and Angela Carter. I must say that I see Dickens, Williams and Carter as particularly relevant for Moore's writing, because he shares many of their sometimes overlapping concerns: the urban imagination and social interest with Dickens, the impulse to delve into the spirit of place and the conception of culture with Williams, the interest for gender and for the mixture of genres with Carter. Then of course there are also other significant writers that had to be taken into account, maybe not so much in terms of past influence but in terms of co-existence and mutual exchange, be it direct – as in the case of Iain Sinclair – or indirect – as in the case of Peter Ackroyd.



N. Vallorani: *I know about Moore's direct collaboration with Sinclair. And I would say they seem to relate to the past and tradition in similar ways: as a living reservoir of images, metaphors and, I would say, stories to be dragged to new life. I would say, again, that the shadow of Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* provides a name to the process: dragging corpses to search their pocket and willingly or accidentally unveil an enigma.*

A. Di Liddo: Yes, though I would say the process is more complex than that. The crucial point with Moore's comics is that his wide use of intertextuality is usually not displayed for its own sake, but that it aims at expressing the author's worldview. This is the reason why I found it essential to highlight it less as a sterile obsession for citation than as a phenomenon of 'heteroglossia' or 'plurivocality', to use Bakhtin's terminology.

N. Vallorani: *Now, you mention Bakhtin as a critical tool, and you use it also in your book, together with other scholars that basically worked on literature. This leads us to one of the crucial matters I'm interested in. Graphic novel is quite young as a field of academic research. This may posit the problem of devising an effective and rigorous critical approach, And I would add that the problem may become particularly relevant when choosing to deal with such an eclectic artist as Alan Moore.*

A. Di Liddo: One of the many matters that certainly make the study of Moore's work appealing – again, an issue he shares with Angela Carter – is the fact that the wide bulk of his fictional production is accompanied by almost equally abundant expressions of theoretical thought. Through these – his early treatise *On Writing for Comics*, or occasional essays such as the "Bog Venus" paper for the countercultural magazine *Arthur*, and an impressive amount of lengthy interviews – Moore has extensively elaborated on his views as to the comics medium and the means to creating effective comic books, on his ideas about society and culture at large, and lately on his beliefs about psychogeography and magic.

N. Vallorani: *He also shares this interest with other artists he works with. And I would say they are producing, individually and together, the most seminal, original and committed work seen around recently. Think of Sinclair and Petit's work on the M25: psychogeography and magic also there, among other issues...*

A. Di Liddo: To me, this 'theoretical' aspect of Moore's thinking is crucial to understanding his work, because it lies at the core of the highly self-conscious – in its philosophical sense – quality of his comics. It probably motivates the strong metafictional inclination we find in much of his work, especially in *From Hell* and in the *Promethea* books, both narratives that at a certain point address the reader in direct form and draw his/her attention to the act of reading, to the awareness that he/she is facing a fictional representation of events and not an alleged truth. The same happens in *Watchmen*, where readers are not directly addressed but where fake documents or newspaper excerpts are incorporated within the comic narrative together with a parallel, secondary



comic story-within-the-story, thus eliciting a heightened perception of the fictionality of the whole construct.

N. Vallorani: *Under this perspective, Moore is not working from scratch. I would say he also exploits some inbuilt qualities of the graphic novel ...*

A. Di Liddo: Yes. In more ways than one, these features are part and parcel of what I define as the performative quality inherent to comics and especially expressed by Moore's work. Performativity is ingrained in comics because of the blatant unreality of their representations; the necessary simplification of the lines on the page and the appearance of dialogue balloons and captions make it really difficult to feign mimesis – that is, they make it far more difficult to feign compared to the attempts of plain prose narratives or films. Moore is very aware of this and for this reason he intersperses his works with estranging, self-referential narrative strategies (characters somehow addressing the readers; captions reflecting on the possibilities of their own narratives; fictions within the fictions that by their very presence state their imaginary nature, and so on) with the aim of keeping his readers' critical abilities well on the alert. Last but not least, among the more recent undertakings of Moore's there is a series of spoken word performances that ultimately bring to light his fondness for actual stage performing.

N. Vallorani: *This also means a particular care in outlining the setting of his stories, doesn't it? Moore is never sketchy or careless in drawing the places where his characters move ...*

A. Di Liddo: One of the aspects that most fascinate Moore's readers, including me, is his focus on place such as it emerges in works like *Big Numbers* and especially *From Hell*. As I explain in the book, this has been widely – and quite rightly – compared to the notion of psychogeography, mainly as it is elucidated and put into practice by Iain Sinclair. Moore himself defines it as an almost divinatory activity; its remarkable quality lies in the fact that it is indeed an excavation of the cultural, historical and social heritage of specific places, but the mystical charm it retains endows it with a sort of universalizing impetus. Which means, in more tangible terms, that *From Hell* turns out to be an analytic examination of certain issues in English Victorian culture while pondering upon the great mechanisms of history and the birth of the twentieth century. This constant movement between being both local and global is another constant factor in Moore's writing. In some works one of these two drives is taken to dramatic extremes – for example, extreme locality in the prose novel *Voice of the Fire*, where the author's own Northampton area becomes "implicit in the blood", or extreme universality in the *Promethea* books, where the protagonist's adventures in magic become a proper dissertation on the structure of the universe and on man's systems of knowledge. But in most cases the local/specific and global/universalizing aspects tend to coexist.



N. Vallorani: *It is true that Moore takes a position on highly problematic issues, among which the ones you quote. In your book you also work on the underlying texture of his work openly dealing with occult sciences.*

A. Di Liddo: Magic is one of the issues that some people view as controversial in Moore's output, at least in academic environments. Some see his interest in magic, in the Kabbalah and in occult studies in general as some kind of weird and not too clever New Age drift. While being myself a sceptical person with regard to this kind of stands, I think this should be considered in close connection with what Moore includes in his definition of magic, i.e. its articulation – referring back to Aleister Crowley's designation – as a "linguistic phenomenon" and its nature as the means to access the higher level of consciousness that Moore calls "Ideaspace", a sort of mutual space of the imagination which is strongly reminiscent of Jung's collective unconscious. So this is actually consistent with Moore's penchant for the elaboration of a theory about comics, literature and the nature of the creation of fiction, which in this case shares some key notions with Northrop Frye's archetypal criticism of literature. In very blunt terms, magic is not meant as doing tricks. That aspect can occur too, and the author is usually glad to speak ironically about it; nevertheless, in Moore's conception magic is mainly a word for defining his theory of knowledge.

N. Vallorani: *Working on more specific issues, would you say Moore's graphic narrative somehow suggests his commitment to an English or British identity? Is the matter of Englishness implied in his art?*

A. Di Liddo: Moore's rootedness in English culture emerges from his background and from several other features of his writing, but the expression of his concerns about Englishness is best expressed in his choice to focus on the criticism of two key historical moments: the Victorian Age and the years of Margaret Thatcher's rule, actually a time when many views that had originated under queen Victoria's auspices, especially as regards imperialism and repressive gender politics, were taken up once again and subsequently radicalized. This clearly emerges in two graphic novels set in Victorian times, i.e. the overtly tragic *From Hell* and the seemingly playful and light-hearted (but in fact biting critical) parody of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, and in the many works set either explicitly in the Thatcher years – *Big Numbers*, *Skizz* – or in sci-fi and dystopian worlds where social injustice and cultural authoritarianism lord it, causing unemployment, outbursts of violence and massive collective unease such as in *The Ballad of Halo Jones* or the renowned *V for Vendetta*. So the generalized fear of the Other that seemed to reach its peak in those two historical periods, lies at the heart of much of what Moore criticises in contemporary English identity and culture.



N. Vallorani: *Would you say Moore reflects on other kinds of Otherness?*

A. Di Liddo: Moore's vision of gender issues is another key feature in his work and in the debate regarding it. In my essay I tackled it for certain aspects that were functional to the areas I chose to deal with, but I have to say that it might deserve separate treatment – probably a full book could be devoted to it. Gender and sexual identity always hold remarkable weight in Moore's output, be it in the deconstruction of the pattern of the stereotypical superhero character, such as in *Marvelman* and in *Watchmen*, or in the representation of a character's inability to build healthy sexual and interpersonal relationships as a result of repressive society as in *Halo Jones*, or in the pressing defence of the right to otherness made clear by the poem *The Mirror of Love* and by the portrayal of the relation between the Louisiana swamp vegetable monster and his human girlfriend in *Swamp Thing*. But the works where gender and sexual issues are most brought to the foreground are definitely the more recent *Promethea* and *Lost Girls*, and especially the latter. Here sex becomes the organizational principle structuring the whole narrative, it shapes the very chronotope – in simpler words, the space and time – of the story. And if this, as I argue in the book, ultimately fails narratively because it ends up building too schematic a plot, it is probably a victory in ideological terms, because it succeeds in achieving Moore's avowed target of raising critical matters in the contemporary social perception of pornography and sexuality, and of providing an arena for discussing those matters. I think this could be the key to find an answer to the very recent controversy regarding gender in *Promethea* that came out in August 2009 among several international comics scholars (who debated it on the platform of the web-based Comics Scholars Discussion List, an invaluable tool for information and exchange about comics and graphic novels). Some of them were arguing about Moore turning out as a stereotypically male chauvinist in representing his feminist protagonist, adolescent Sophie Bangs, while having sex with an ugly old man in exchange for magical knowledge. In my view, the matter is a bit more complex than this, considering that the apology of non-normative sexuality is a recurrent element in the author's work.

N. Vallorani: *So, what was he trying to do?*

A. Di Liddo: In my view, what Moore was trying to do here was once again to provide ground for discussion through disturbing the reader by challenging preconceptions instead of offering more reassuring figurations – once again a feature he shares with Angela Carter, who was also often criticised because of her non-dogmatic stance which often distressed many of her fellow feminists.

N. Vallorani: *So, again, the matter is: how can we define the borders? And is ideology, in its purity, the best way to tackle with reality?*

A. Di Liddo: And we also go back to the hybridism of graphic novel. It is what allows Moore to contaminate Dickens, Carter, Shakespeare and popular culture, but it also



requires a careful, very flexible and open-minded approach, combining different tools, and sort of migrating from the field of dogmatic canon to the multiplicity of popular art.



Alan Moore



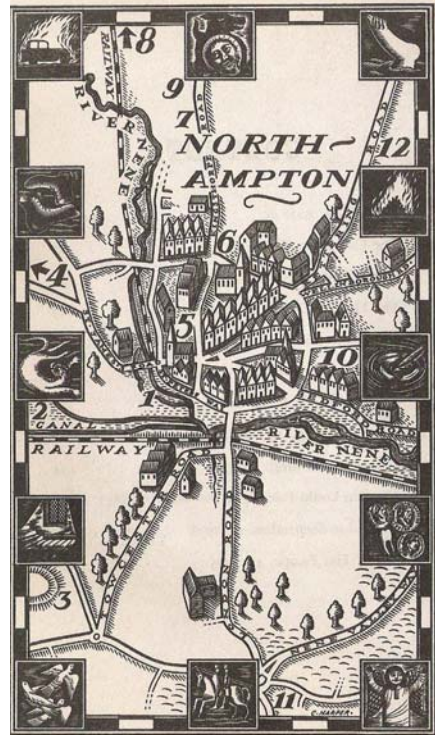
Halo Jones



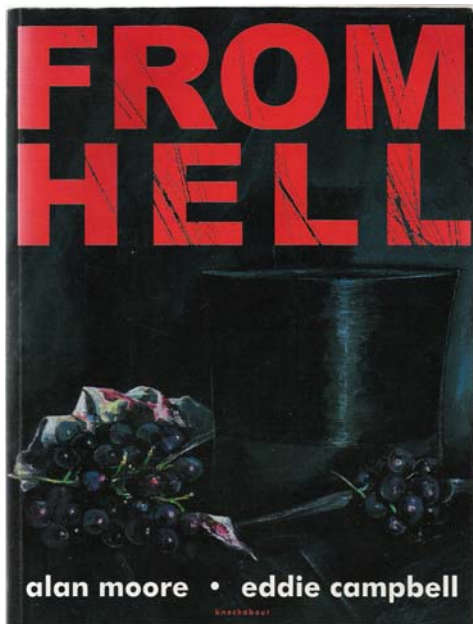
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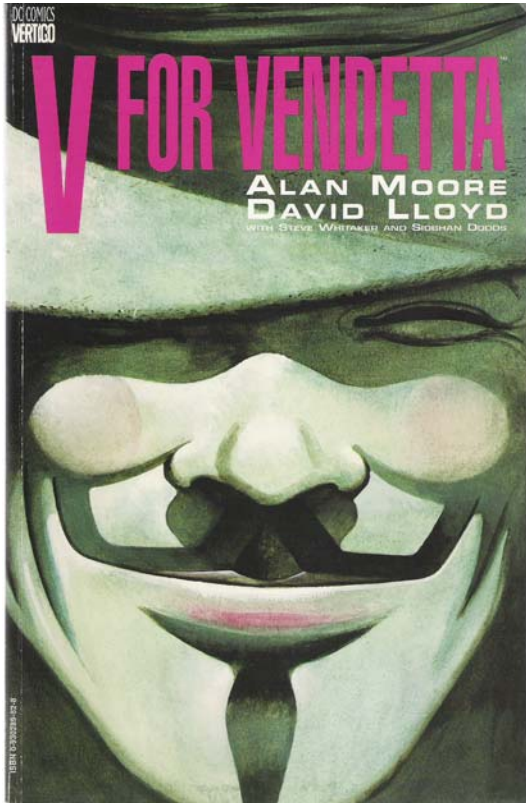
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From Hell



Promethea



V For Vendetta

Nicoletta Vallorani is Professor of English Literature and Cultural Studies at the University of Milan. Her specialisations include media studies, gender studies and queer studies. She has also worked the cultural and ideological implications of translation, and on the relation between language and ideology in contemporary cultures. Her current research focuses on body politics and cultural ideology, the body and the city, body language, cultural representation and disease. Her work on J.Conrad, H.G.Wells, Angela Carter, Will Self and Martin Amis is more grounded in the field of literary studies, while more recent approaches to I.Sinclair, D.Jarman, O.Welles, T.Harrison, M.Winterbottom reveal a more specific reference to cultural studies' theories and methods. She has recently published on formula fiction, cinema and literature, urban topographies, the representation of the body, the representation of war in contemporary British and American cultures.

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