Introduction: Continuity in Literary Form and History

William Kuskin

Literature is a synthetic art. In this, it stands somewhat at odds with academic organization overall, which seeks to discipline such synthesis, to parse knowledge and codify human expression according to grammatical law, to invest authority discretely and in doing so set the boundary lines of taste and import. Such an agon is particularly clear in the growing body of scholarship on cartoons, comics, and graphic novels. For the critical response to this material has been to isolate it, to delimit its parameters through a series of definitions, a list of noteworthy texts, and a lexicon of terms. *Graphia: Literary Criticism and the Graphic Novel* argues otherwise. Graphic stories highlight the synthetic nature of literary production. In doing so, their poetics bring the complex interplay of material and rhetorical forms that define the literary object into great focus, and thus reinvigorate the current discussion of literary method by recalling the essentially interdisciplinary nature of literary analysis.1 *Graphia* contextualizes comics and graphic novels within the medium of the literary book in order to demonstrate their inherent difference, and thus decontextualize literature overall.

The current critical work on comics and graphic novels coalesces around three main claims: that the artform originates in the early nineteenth century, that it is best read structurally, and that it constitutes a new medium. In each case, these claims center around the concepts of rupture and rebirth.2 For example, though there has been some debate as to the foundational roles of William Hogarth (1697–1764) and Richard Felton Outcault (1863–1928), comics criticism currently recognizes Rodolphe Töpffer (1799–1846), a Genovese schoolmaster and university lecturer who wrote seven complete illustrated books, as “reinventing” Hogarth’s tableaus in terms of sequential narrative, and thus as the father of the *graphic novel.*3 This history parallels the second major theme, terminology, which begins with Will Eisner’s 1978 publication of *A Contract with God* and his subsequent popularization of the term *graphic novel.*4 Almost every monograph on comics has sought to define this term and with it a taxonomy for reading.5 Though differing in detail, these taxonomies assert the reader’s imaginative involvement in a structural relationship between the individual panel and the sequencing of such panels as they constitute the strip, pamphlet, book, and album. Essentially, then, these first two points, the story of origins and the story of the panels, grapple with the same problem—how to understand fragmentation and continuity within time—
in different registers, one in terms of historical causation, the other in terms of narrative definition, and both come to the same conclusion: a sequence of break and reinvention define comics.

These two claims are underwritten by the third: comics constitute a medium. This point is reiterated in almost all the existing literature from Scott McCloud's path-breaking 1993 study, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, where he writes "The Artform—the Medium—known as comics is a vessel which can hold any number of ideas and images," through to Hillary Chute's 2008 essay in *PMLA*: "I treat comics as a medium—not as a low-brow genre, which is how it is usually understood." Theiry Groensteen offers a particularly clear formulation of the argument in his essay, "Why are Comics Still in Search of Cultural Legitimization":

> It is evident that comics cannot be considered a genre in that sense, as they englobe and traverse many different genres: there are science-fiction comics, sentimental, erotic or autobiographical comics, detective stories and westerns in the form of comics . . . Comics art is an autonomous and original medium. The only things it has in common with literature are: that it is printed and sold in bookshops, and that it contains linguistic statements. But why should it be systematically lowered to the level of para- or sub-literature?

Like McCloud and Chute, Groensteen separates comics from the anti-intellectual connotations of pulp fiction. His argument is thus concerned with formal definition and with authority, concerns it resolves through the assertion of originality: because the form of comics encompasses many genres, it must surmount that category as its own medium; conversely, because a medium is *sui generis*, it must have authority unto itself. In the identification of a founding father, in the elaboration of a self-contained terminology, and in the totalizing notion of a medium, the three main claims of comics criticism suggest that if comics criticism is undergoing a renaissance, the very notion of renaissance lies at its core.

Such is the particular irony of the field: observing fluidity—the possibilities inherent in the page, the play of imagination in the gutter, the anthologizing process of print, the ways influence and commerce contribute to artistic legacy—much comics criticism nevertheless hews to category. For example, in *Reading Comics*, Douglas Wolk explains that "the genre/media confusion is an error of ignorance," and continues, "prose fiction, sculpture, video: those, like comics, are media." But the ignorance here is entirely Wolk's, for prose fiction simply isn't an autonomous medium, which by definition needs to have some quality of *mediation*, some sense of the intervening *material substrate* that makes the transmission of ideas possible. Prose fiction is a powerful genre, one best juxtaposed to prose non-fiction, and that finds its identity not in its difference from sculpture and video but in its generic distinction from poetry and drama, which like prose travel through time and among people through the medium of the book. Comics and graphic novels share much with printed prose and poetry, and the near impossibility of separating the history of comics from the history of the book overall—from broadsheets and religious writing, from illustrated news
and literature—is perhaps the most striking truth for any reader of David Kunzle's two impressive volumes on the history of the comic strip, *The Early Comic Strip, 1450–1825* and *The Nineteenth Century*. As Groensteen points out, comics and graphic novels are printed and sold in bookshops. As such, their primary *medium* is the book. Within this medium, they present an inscriptive poetics of great force and beauty.

The alternative to such a criticism of category is one of continuity. I might suggest such an approach through a mild detour to Töpffer's prefaces, all of which begin with an epigraph that describes his graphic novels, which he termed *histoire en estampes* ("stories in pictures"), as books. The epigraph first appears in his self-published lithograph, the 1833 *Histoire de Monsieur Jabot*:

> Va, petit livre, et choisis ton monde, car aux choses folles, qui ne rit pas, bâille; qui ne se livre pas, résiste; qui raisonne, se mêprend; et qui veut rester grave, en est maître.

So Töpffer sends the first graphic novel off to meet its public. He figures his little book as an autonomous object that must make its way in the world, a world defined by readers witty and dull, compliant and oppositional, rational but in error, dissembling yet satisfied. In this journey, the little book seems to choose its world in much the way any reader chooses a book, and so it acts as both a metonym for *Monsieur Jabot* and for the processes that go on around it. Thus the epigraph suggests a direction to Töpffer's readers as well as his book: laugh and yield at this crazy world. This seems true to much of his fiction, which continually offers up characters who resist their world, who, above all, cannot yield and only please themselves according to narrow constraints. The father of comics prefaces his works both by recognizing their difference—they are crazy things—and by embedding them in a context of literary culture, a crazy thing itself.

The phrase "Go Little Book" is, of course, a longstanding trope, one that comes through Ovid’s *Tristia* and *Epistulæ ex pontō*, from Horace’s *Epistles.* Töpffer, a schoolmaster and prose writer, perhaps knew it from Middle French chansons and lyrics, or from Boccaccio. Introduced to English writing by Geoffrey Chaucer at the end of his long poem, *Troilus and Criseyde*, the “Go Little Book” trope has a long history in English literature. Chaucer writes:

> Go litel bok, go, litel myn tragedye,
> Ther God thi makere yet, er that he dye,
> So sende myght to make in som comedye!
> But litel book, no making thow n’envie,
> But subgit be to alle poesy;
> And kis the steppes where as thow seest pace
> Virgile, Ovide, Omer, Lucan, and Stace.
> Go little book, go my little tragedy, wherein God might send your maker some
comedy before he dies. But little book, do not contend with other making, but be subject to all poesy. And kiss the steps were you see Virgil, Ovid, Homer, Lucan, and Statius walk.¹³

As in Töpffer, Chaucer presents the book as an autonomous object that goes out into the world. In Töpffer, the book must contend with readers, and so the lesson he would teach it is to become a reader itself, a social object engaged with the surrounding crazy world. Put more plainly, he would seek to acknowledge its unique nature, but nevertheless integrate it into reading culture. In Chaucer the terms are somewhat different. Here, the book is embedded in generic definition: it is a tragedy; Chaucer hopes for a comedy. As such, its challenge is not to find a place among readers but among writers: to be subject to all poesy. The book still operates as a metonym for Chaucer’s task, which is to place himself as a vernacular writer—perhaps even a writer of lowbrow paraliterature striving for authority—amongst the established figures of Virgil, Ovid, Homer, Lucan, and Cicero. “Go Little Book,” writes Töpffer; “Go, litle bok,” writes Chaucer: In both cases the book is a powerful trope that figures what it means to write an emerging form of literature—the graphic story, vernacular literature—within a literary context.

Chaucer’s figuration of authority was so successful that, like Töpffer, for a great while he was understood by the terms of renaissance, as the father of English poetry who reinvented English literature. Such an understanding overshadowed the literary culture that he knew and that developed in his wake, blotting from literary history the very poets, scribes, and readers of the fifteenth century who named him father and constructed his works as an authoritative poetic: “Oh little book, who gave you hardiness” writes Thomas Hoccleve at the close of the 1410–11 Regiment of Princes; “Now go your way, you little rude book,” writes John Lydgate in his Temple of Glas (ca. 1420); “Go little treatise, naked of eloquence,” writes James I in his 1423–24 Kingis Quair; “Go little quire, submit yourself everywhere,” prints William Caxton at the end of the 1477 Book of Curtesye; “Go little book, thyself present” writes “Immeritó” at the headnote to Edmund Spenser’s 1579 Shepheardes Calender.¹⁴ Participating in the very trope Chaucer deploys, these writers create him as canonical and thus construct a history in which he forms the definitive break-point from the past. Without them, Chaucer would be impressive, but not definitive, one fascinating figure in the powerful flow of time. The past two decades of literary scholarship have done much to recover the complexity of this literary culture and, in turn, realize that the notion of renaissance is an ideological construction designed to produce literary authority at the expense of the full texture of literary history.¹⁵ The same is true for comics: beyond its striking nature, the assertion of renaissance offers very little help in exploring the continuity of literary forms, which it tends to displace wholesale, and instead restricts the greater implications of this art form for all the arts that travel by the book.

For every book operates as a trope. Scott McCloud writes, “But unlike other media, in comics the past is more than just memories for the audience and future is more than just possibilities. Both past and future are real and visible and all around us.”¹⁶ The observation
is a fine one, but taken within the context of the declaration of a new medium, it appears to miss the larger continuities of literary form, to reduce the nature of the book to the rectangular prose block epitomized by the twentieth-century novel. This is only one articulation of the book and a rather uninspiring one at that. Any book, like any sentence, offers up linearity as a starting point, but only the most unimaginative (or untrained) reader holds to such a course. Even the reader of the most unadorned paperback novel is ceaselessly invited to move from the future to the past, to hear an author’s voice long after she has died, to immerse himself in chronologically older aspects of the narrative, to make imaginative, thematic, and symbolic connections between overtly unrelated points of narrative continuity that conspire to figural meaning. Books embody these symbolic relations, and thus are tropes as well as objects. Cartoons, comics, graphic novels—call them what you will, I think of them as *graphia*—exploit the power of trope in exciting ways, engaging multiple subgenres and material forms. Because the interchange between these material and imaginative forms defy one collective definition, I argue that the categorical definitions of originality, structural relations, and media tend to ossify the profound connections between graphia and literature. The defining feature of all literature is the trope, a flexible and resilient mode of expression, and graphia has great lessons to teach us about troping.

The collective impulse that binds together the essays that follow is to recognize the ways categorical distinctions fail to describe the graphic novel, and in turn, the identity of literature itself. Specifically, *Graphia: Literary Criticism and the Graphic Novel* discovers that the application of the established methodological tools of literary criticism—book history, bibliography, close reading—prove tremendously useful, but nevertheless do not fully account for the form, which, to generalize from Christopher Pizzino’s reading of Frank Miller’s *Sin City*, “ultimately refuses such reconciliation” with literary standards. In this refusal, the reading of comics cannot help but redound on our own reading of canonical literature, with what Jan Baetens refers to as “uncountable opportunities to reframe our views of what literature is.” The poetics of graphia powerfully complicate literary understanding by reminding us of the synthetic nature of representation, which, like the nature of trope itself, is premised on an almost magical synthesis of forms—of text and image certainly, but also of the literal and the figurai within the tactile presence of the book. *Graphia* does not so much claim the graphic novel for literature, then; it claims literature for the graphic novel.

To these ends, I have organized the essays to flow broadly from issues of the book, through questions of form and discipline, to the monthly serial. This organization is porous and the essays are connected in manifold ways. Martha Rust begins the collection with her essay, “It’s a Magical World: The Page in Comics and Medieval Manuscripts,” which reads two pairs of texts—the final installment of Bill Watterson’s *Calvin and Hobbes* against a thirteenth-century French *chanson de geste*, *Parise la duchesse*, and a page of the Luttrell Psalter against C. Tyler’s story “Just a Bad Seed”—to discover the book as “a tool for thinking.” Following her, Johanna Drucker’s essay, “What is Graphic about Graphic Novels?” sketches a history of technological and symbolic forms, building to a reading of graphic syn-
tax and formalist poetics in Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* and Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan, The Smartest Kid on Earth*. My own essay, “Batman In the Trash: Canon Construction and Bibliography,” reads the ways various printings of a single Batman storyline articulate cultural capital. In each of these essays, the book operates as a historically specific representational technology. Yet, as Drucker reminds us, “No progress exists in the worlds of art,” a crucial reminder for the history of literary production, which is so often conceived of as sequentially motivated. The history of literary production is both continuous and discontinuous; like the nature of art, it is synthetic.17

Jan Baetens refocuses the collection more overtly on the issue of disciplinary distinction with his essay, “Graphic Novels: Literature without Text?” by asking two fundamental questions: “what do we mean when we say that a graphic novel is (or can be) a literary work?” and perhaps more pressingly, “how does the graphic novel challenge our idea of literature?” His answer—demonstrated thoroughly a variety of texts including Martin Vaughn-James’s *The Cage*, Emmanuel Guibert’s *Alan’s War*, and Hergé’s *Adventures of Tintin*—is to turn away from monopolizing definitions: “literariness,” he writes, “is defined in a very ad hoc way: not in reference to textual models, but in reference to standards of quality, originality, and medium-specificity within the field of visual storytelling.” A number of essays follow this line of thinking. Karin Kukkonen reads metaphor and metonym in Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons’s *Watchmen* to argue that “tropes allow for more flexibility and complexity in the meaning-making of a text than semiotic code.” Monica Chiu continues the discussion in “Sequencing and Contingent Individualism in the Graphic, Postcolonial Spaces of Satrapi’s *Persepolis* and Okubo’s *Citizen 13660*,” which explores space as a politically and ideologically charged metaphor. In both Kukkonen’s and Chiu’s essays the page itself takes on the formal properties of a trope, as Chiu argues, “in ways unavailable to authors of prose novels.” Following Chiu, Christopher Pizzino’s essay, “Art That Goes BOOM: Genre and Aesthetics in Frank Miller’s *Sin City*,” reads volume four of the series, *That Yellow Bastard*, against Raymond Chandler, Roy Lichtenstein, Goseki Kojima, and Linda Hutcheon. Pizzino finds within Miller’s work a paradox: while Miller’s self-conscious use of existing generic tropes suggests continuity with literary culture, he is nevertheless resistant to critique, self-sealing and self-affirming. Thus Pizzino brings us to Charles Hatfield’s essay, “How to Read a . . .,” an analysis of Jamie Hernandez’s 1981 four-page comic “How to Kill a . . .” by Isabel Ruebens,” generously included here in its entirety as Color Plates 10 through 13. Hatfield closes the section with an analysis of comics as so synthetic and so changeable that they constitute not a discipline so much as an “anti-discipline.” In this flexibility, this ad hoc anti-disciplinariness, these essays write a substantial turn in both European and Anglo-American criticism, which has, by and large, been chiefly semiotic, structural, and self-ratifying.

Hatfield’s essay ends with a discussion of serialization, and so the next two essays turn to mainstream serialized superhero fiction, a genre often viewed as artistically compromised by its commercial and juvenile allegiances. The section begins with Bradford Wright’s “From Social Consciousness to Cosmic Awareness: Superhero Comic Books and the
Culture of Self-Interrogation, 1968–1974.” Wright performs an archival reading of the letters pages from Marvel and DC Comics across the late sixties and early seventies to argue that the venue contributed powerfully to the development of the graphic novel in the 1980s. For Wright, these comics serve as a cultural barometer, marking a pop turn to cynicism and nihilism, stretching the limits of the genre. Philip Sandifer’s essay, “Amazing Fantasies: Trauma, Affect, and Superheroes,” takes up the serialized Superhero comic where Wright leaves off. Sandifer reads the stories of Superman, Batman, and Spider-Man as continuous narratives—what he calls the super-long form of comics—that repeat, but never resolve, traumatic origins. In place of any final settlement with trauma, these narratives imagine, not the escapism so easily levied at the genre, but “a fantasy of what the Other would have to be for our powerless selves to be safe.” These themes—serialization, otherness, and loss—are pulled together in the collection’s final essay, Sean Carney’s “The Ear of the Eye, or, Do Drawings Make Sounds?” Here Carney moves across genre and format, reading Mike Mignola’s Hellboy, Chester Brown’s Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography, Joe Sacco’s The Fixer: A Story from Sarajevo, Roland Barthes’s analysis of Guido Crepax’s The Story of O, and Alan Moore and Melinda Gebbie’s Lost Girls to formulate an aesthetic of otherness in which we read “the silence of the Other in the field of the visible.” The three essays thus complete Graphia by returning to the terms of fragmentation and unity, not as encased in a totalizing medium, but as a fractured continuity mediated by print serialization. In doing so, they discover the unique aesthetic of the Silver Surfer’s nihilistic quest, of lost origins scattered in the present, and of the silent page’s profound voice.

In its cohesion, Graphia is somewhat uncharacteristic of the new ELN. For rather than manifestos and clustered reviews, it is very much a collection of essays arguing the central thread that comics are interestingly entangled in a series of questions about media, genre, and representation, obscured by the current focus on authority and definition. Above all, it is in this central interdisciplinarity, or as Hatfield terms it, “anti-disciplinarity,” that I find that the issue is truly representative of ELN’s governing sensibility. For the fundamental tension between creation and criticism marks an important division. Yet we should not entirely assert disciplining rigidity as an end in itself. Since its relaunch in spring of 2006, ELN has defined itself by an inclusive willingness to range across themes (religion, queerness, time), textuality (the archive), and the arts (photography, now the graphic novel). This interdisciplinarity, I suggest, forces introspection on what we do as scholars and readers. Given Literary Studies’s current state, Graphia thrusts its inquiry into an avant garde outside disciplinary practice to discover, not theoretical scaffolding and encoded complexity, but that the central tenants of literary study remain powerful modes of reading that can, in turn, be powerfully developed.

William Kuskin
University of Colorado at Boulder
NOTES


2 There is often suggested a distinction in comics criticism between an Anglo-American interest in literary history and a Franco-Belgian interest in the semiotics of the page, see Anne Magnussen and Hans-Christian Christiansen’s introduction to Comics/Culture: Analytical and Theoretical Approaches to Comics (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2000). This distinction is somewhat misleading, however, because American criticism has produced deeply structuralist accounts of comics, such as Will Eisner’s Comics and Sequential Art (1985; expanded and reprinted, Tamarac, FL: Poorhouse Press, 2005) and Scott McCloud’s three books, Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art (New York: Harper, 1994), Making Comics (New York: DC Comics, 2000), and Reinventing Comics (New York: Harper, 2006). With the translation of Thierry Groensteen’s 1999 Système de la bande dessinée for English readers as The System of Comics, trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2007), the distinction promises to become more blurred.


4 Some of these definitions are reviewed in Hillary Chute’s essay, “Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative,” PMLA 123 (2008): 452–65. Chute provides a particularly useful discussion of Eisner’s role in defining the term, 453 and 462, note 3.

5 The main perspectives on comics are usefully reviewed by Magnussen and Christiansen in their introduction to Comics/Culture 7–27, and in Anne Magussen’s essay, “The Semiotics of C. S. Pierce as a Theoretical Framework for the Understanding of Comics,” in Comics/Culture 193–207. Whether discussed by Scott McCloud as “closure” between two otherwise separate panels within his six categories of transition in Understanding Comics (63–68 and 70–74), by Robert C. Harvey as “breakdown” and four “narrative threads” in The Art of the Comic Book: An Aesthetic History (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1996), or by Thierry Groensteen as spatio-topical operations (22), involving decomposition (decoupage) and braiding (tressage) across the multiframe of the page and hyperframe of the bound object (30) in the System of Comics, the field is currently interested in forging a taxonomy governed by a tension between singularity and narrative unity. One salutory approach to reading comics is Charles Hatfield’s in Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2005).
Thus I find the much-used notion of hybridity somewhat misleading, for hybridity, at root, suggests a half-breed offspring, and in definition, a composite made of heterogeneous elements. Such division, as Nop Mass writes in "The Archeology of the Dutch Comic Strip," is "nothing less than fatal" (Dierick and Lefèvre 77). What strikes me about effective comics is the seamless participation of all elements of the book in the production of meaning, and so I privilege a literary-formalist mode of reading over a semiotic or structuralist approach because I believe the merger of visual and textual elements occurs on the level of trope.


Kunzle, *Complete Comic Strips* 5.


McCloud, *Understanding Comics* 104.

See Pascal Lefèvre’s discussion of publishing format in “The Importance of Being ‘Published’: A Comparative Study of Different Comics Formats,” in Magnussen and Christiansen 91–106.