

Comics as Literature?

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Not all comics are art. What about the comics that are art? What sort of art are they? In particular, are comics a form of literature? For a variety of reasons it is tempting to think that at least some comics are literature. Nevertheless, many theorists reject the 'comics as literature' view. And although some reasons for resisting that view are misguided, I shall argue that there are other good reasons for being hesitant about treating comics as a form of literature. This leaves us at an impasse with respect to the classification of comics. I suggest that the way out of the impasse is to recognize that comics are a hybrid art form.

Introduction

Not all comics are art.¹ Like film and photography, the medium can and often is used to make art, but it can also be used in non-artistic ways. Various examples of instructional comics plausibly fall outside the sphere of art.² I would suggest that the same is true of some, but not all, pornographic comics (e.g. Tijuana Bibles). If you are not happy with those examples of non-art comics, I suspect that you will be able to generate your own cases.

What about the comics that are art? (Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* strike me as pretty clear examples of comics that fall into that category.) What sort of art are they? In particular, are comics a form of literature? They are, after all, typically full of text, commonly found in bookshops where they are often sold in book form under the 'Graphic Novel' heading, appreciated (at least in part) by means of reading, taught in literature classes, occasionally discussed in academic journals devoted to literature, and often reviewed in the book review sections of newspapers and magazines. For these reasons—as well as some others that I shall discuss below—it is tempting to think that at least some comics are literature.

Such a view would be tendentious. There is a significant strain of thought that rejects the 'comics as literature' view. And although some reasons for resisting that view are misguided, I shall argue that there are other good reasons for being hesitant about treating comics as a form of literature. This leaves us in an impasse—we have reason both to classify comics as literature and to resist such classification. I shall suggest that the way out of this impasse is to recognize that comics are a hybrid art form that evolved from literature and a number of other art forms and media. The hybrid nature of comics helps explain a wide range of relevant phenomena, and underwrites the very impasse about comics' literary status that I have described.

1 I take the extension of the term 'comics' to include newspaper comic strips, mainstream, underground and 'alternative' comic books, graphic novels, one-off comics in magazines, photocomics, and webcomics.

2 For discussion and examples, see Will Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art* (Tamarac, FL: Poorhouse Press, 1985), pp. 142–145.

The recognition of the hybridity of the art form also sheds light on a number of theoretical and critical issues that lurk under the surface of the apparently straightforward question about categorization. Given the wealth of serious academic and critical work on literature—and the dearth of such work on comics—the question of whether comics are literature is especially significant since a positive answer would legitimate the application of the philosophy of literature, literary theory, and literary criticism to works in that medium. In fact, I shall argue that once we have recognized that comics are a hybrid, we no longer *need* to determine whether the category of literature includes comics in order to apply what we know about the former to the case of the latter. Unsurprisingly, some theorists reject the idea that comics are a hybrid. I shall argue that they are mistaken.

Categorization and/or Value?

Let me attempt to forestall an objection before I get to the main concerns of this paper. It might be thought that the categorial issue I concern myself with is not as significant as the question of whether any comics ‘possess the kinds of values that the great works of literature possess’.³ That is surely an important question, and although it would require an entirely separate essay in order to address it properly, it is worth saying a bit about it here.

On a straightforward reading of the question, the answer is clearly ‘yes’. Some comics possess *some* of the kinds of values that great literary works possess. For example, most great works of literature are similar to other great works of art in being creative, original, well-structured, and unified. All of these values are exhibited by certain comics. Robert Crumb’s drawing manifests a stunning degree of visual creativity—he has been described by the art critic Robert Hughes as ‘the Brueghel of the 20th Century’.⁴ *Maus* is original in its use of drawings of anthropomorphized animals to tell the story of the Holocaust. Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* is precisely and effectively structured. Chris Ware’s works typically exhibit a remarkable degree of thematic and design unity. And so on.

Presumably the more significant question is whether any comics possess the kinds of values that are especially important in great literature; for example, being well-written, having depth of characterization, exhibiting what Peter Lamarque terms ‘moral seriousness’ in tackling ‘humanly interesting themes’,⁵ and being well-plotted (if they are narrative in form). Are there well-written comics? Insofar as this is linked to uses of language that are appropriate to overall artistic ends, then Harvey Pekar’s autobiographic dialogue in his *American Splendor* strips plausibly fits the bill. Bechdel’s *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* is, as Douglas Wolk argues, largely concerned with the way in which the author comes to understand herself and her family through works of literary fiction,⁶ and it manifests this concern in rich language and the use of a variety of literary tropes. And although many comics lack depth of characterization and much in the way of character development, this is not always the case. Satrapi’s

3 An anonymous referee for the journal suggested this.

4 Crumb. Dir. Terry Zwigoff, 1970. Distributed by Sony Picture Classics.

5 Peter Lamarque, *The Philosophy of Literature* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2009), p. 63.

6 Douglas Wolk, *Reading Comics Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2007), p. 364.

autobiographical graphic novels (*Persepolis* and *Persepolis 2*) are full of rich characterization, and Jeffrey Brown's *Unlikely* explores a first relationship in painstaking detail. What about moral seriousness? Do any comics tackle those humanly interesting themes? Certainly *Maus* does, but it is not the only comic that does so. Moore's *Watchmen* addresses issues of moral responsibility. Chris Ware's work addresses loneliness and alienation. Posy Simmonds deals with love, sex, and social relations in her literary-influenced *Tamara Drewe*. Jessica Abel's story of a naïve young American woman in Mexico, *La Perdida*, deals with the dangers of self-deception. And George Herriman's *Krazy Kat* strips brilliantly tackle the tragedy (and potential comedy) of unrequited love. Moreover, these themes need not be merely superficially addressed as Lamarque and Olsen suggest is the case when perennial or universal themes appear in non-literary fiction.⁷ The best comics—ones like those mentioned above—develop their themes. That is, readers are not simply confronted with clichés—they are encouraged to work out themes, contemplate them, and make sense of the comics in light of them. Finally, careful and intelligent plotting is a central part of many of the best comics. As a reviewer of *Tamara Drewe* in *The Times Literary Supplement* put it: 'its single most impressive attribute is the brilliant management of what would be termed, in a purely literary context, the plot'.⁸

As is made plain by this last quote, the reader need not rely solely on my testimony about the values to be found in comics. There are, for example, the various art and literary awards that comics and comics artists have received in recent years. *Maus* famously won a Pulitzer Prize in 1992. In 2005, two critics for *Time* magazine named *Watchmen* as one of the top 100 English-language novels published since the magazine's founding, and the graphic novel also won a Hugo Award in 1988. Bechdel's *Fun Home* was nominated for a National Book Critics Circle Award, and *Time* named it one of the ten best books of 2006. Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan* won the 2001 Guardian First Book Award and an American Book Award. American Book Awards were also given to Gary Panter's *Jimbo's Inferno* and Joe Sacco's *Palestine*. Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese* was a finalist in 2006 for a National Book Foundation's National Book Award. Ben Katchor, author of *Julius Knipl, Real Estate Photographer: The Beauty Supply District* was the recipient of a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship (i.e. a "Genius Grant") in 2000.

And although, as I have suggested above, there is something of a dearth of serious criticism of comics, there is evidence for the significant value to be found in some comics in some extant examples of criticism. Goethe famously praised Rodolphe Töpffer's picture stories which were, on some accounts, the earliest comics.⁹ The essayist and critic Gilbert Seldes's defence of comics in general, and *Krazy Kat* in particular, in his *The Seven Lively Arts* (1924) is fairly well known:

With those who hold a comic strip cannot be a work of art I shall not traffic. The qualities of *Krazy Kat* are irony and fantasy. . . . It happens that in America irony and fantasy are practiced in the major arts by only one or two men, producing high class trash; and Mr Herriman, working in a despised medium, without an atom of pretentiousness, is day after day producing something essentially fine.¹⁰

7 Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, *Truth, Fiction and Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), pp. 434–436.

8 Mick Imlah, 'Tamara Drewe's Wessex', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 14 November 2007.

9 David Kunzle, *Father of the Comic Strip: Rodolphe Töpffer* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), pp. 49–56.

10 Gilbert Seldes, *The Seven Lively Arts* (New York: Harper, 1924), p. 231.

Much of the contemporary criticism of comics to be found in English appears in newspapers. In the United Kingdom, *The Guardian* regularly covers graphic novels in its Saturday Review section. In the United States, the *New York Times* semi-regularly reviews graphic novels. In 2002 Nick Hornsby published a review of a number of graphic novels in *The Times*, and more recently Douglas Wolk has been reviewing them there and in other venues. Moreover, these reviews, and those by other well-known authorities on the subject such as Paul Gravett and Roger Sabin, amount to more than reports of preferences. This is fully fledged criticism—albeit in compact form. Here, for example, is Hornsby on Kim Deitch’s recent graphic novel *The Boulevard of Broken Dreams*:

[H]is drawings are comparable to R. Crumb’s in their feverish, angry energy . . . and come as something of a shock after the clean lines of his younger colleagues. But his experience and sophistication allow him to do things that the youngsters are not yet capable of: ‘The Boulevard of Broken Dreams’ is full of metaphor and imagery that shift meaning, flashbacks and flash-forwards and a bagful of tricks that give the book heft. What is particularly impressive is the way that Deitch juggles the personal—his artist hero is plagued by a cartoon demon that simultaneously inspires and destroys him—and the cultural dimensions of his narrative: his book is just as much about the neutering and Disneyfication of animation as it is about the self-destructiveness of genius.¹¹

The reader may have noted that I have said little in defence of superhero comics to this point. That is no accident. I do not believe that mainstream superhero comics typically possess much in the way of substantive literary value(s). There are exceptions of course—superhero comics by Alan Moore, Neil Gaiman, and Grant Morrison among others do possess some of the values that I have discussed above. But for the most part superhero comics are not especially rich in theme, characterization, language, or sophisticated plotting. I suspect it is this fact—that superhero comics (and, perhaps, daily newspaper comic strips or ‘funnies’) do not generally possess much in the way of literary or artistic values—that underwrites much across-the-board scepticism about the art of comics. But this is a misguided scepticism. For although it may be the case that the best-known comics in English fall into these categories, there are a very large number of comics that do not.¹²

Finally, is it the case that the categorial question really is less important than the question about value? It is plausible that warranted critical evaluation of works of art depends on their proper categorization.¹³ If so, then categorial questions are of utmost importance. Matters of value and evaluation may be our ultimate concern, but dealing with these matters depends on settling categorial issues.

11 Nick Hornsby, ‘Draw What You Know,’ *New York Times*, 22 December 2002.

12 For discussion of more examples of non-superhero comics, see Wolk, *Reading Comics* and Charles Hatfield, *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2005). For a useful anthology which contains relevant examples, see Ivan Brunetti (ed.), *An Anthology of Graphic Fiction, Cartoons, and True Stories* (New Haven, CT: Yale U.P., 2006). See also the various volumes in the *Best American Comics Series* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin).

13 Kendall Walton, ‘Categories of Art’, *Philosophical Review*, vol. 79 (1970), pp. 334–367; Noël Carroll, *On Criticism* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

Are Comics Literature? The State of the Debate

Given the high status of literature in our culture and the aspirational nature of much of the contemporary discourse about comics, it is not surprising that a range of theorists have claimed that comics count as literature. The great comics artist Will Eisner claims that ‘in every sense, this misnamed form of reading is entitled to be regarded as literature because the images are employed as language’.¹⁴ In *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why*, Geoff Klock writes that in works such as *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen* ‘the building density of tradition becomes anxiety, the superhero narrative becomes literature’.¹⁵ And Charles Hatfield has recently suggested that ‘the graphic novel in particular has become comics’ passport to recognition as a form of literature’.¹⁶

But there are dissenting views both within the comics community and outside of it. Some comics theorists and practitioners argue that it is a mistake to treat comics as literature. Douglas Wolk criticizes the idea that comics are literature in his recent popular book on the form, *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean*: ‘They bear a strong resemblance to literature—they use words, they’re printed in books, they have narrative content—but they’re no more a literary form than movies or opera are literary forms.’¹⁷ And Alan Moore, one of the most respected contemporary authors of mainstream comics, puts it this way in an essay on writing comics:

With the best will in the world, if you try to describe the Dazzler graphic novel in the same terms as you describe *Moby Dick* then you’re simply asking for trouble. As opposed to films without movement or sound we get novels without scope, depth or purpose. That isn’t good enough either. . . . Rather than seizing upon the superficial similarities between comics and films or comics and books in the hope that some of the respectability of those media will rub off upon us, wouldn’t it be more constructive to focus our attention upon those ideas where comics are special and unique?¹⁸

Moreover, comics—certain comics at least—are commonly invoked by literary theorists and philosophers of literature precisely as examples of things which are similar to but not quite literature. So, for example, Terry Eagleton states that ‘*Superman* comics and Mills and Boon novels are fictional but not generally regarded as literature, and certainly not as Literature.’¹⁹ Similarly, Eileen John and Dominic McIver Lopes suggest that ‘a comic book that is a work of fiction and has aesthetic merit may be a work of art but not a work of literature’.²⁰ And in the introduction to their recent coedited anthology of works on the philosophy of literature, David Davies and Carl Matheson write the following:

14 Will Eisner, *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative* (Tamarac, FL: Poorhouse Press, 1996), p. 5.

15 Geoff Klock, *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why* (New York: Continuum, 2002), p. 3.

16 Hatfield, *Alternative Comics*, p. ix.

17 Wolk, *Reading Comics*, p. 14.

18 Alan Moore, *Writing for Comics*, Vol. 1 (Rantoul, IL: Avatar Press, 2007), pp. 3–4.

19 Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 2.

20 Eileen John and Dominic McIver Lopes (eds), *Philosophy of Literature: Contemporary and Classic Readings* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), p. 43.

To ask as to the nature of literature in the artistic sense is to ask what makes a piece of writing a literary artwork. What we are seeking is a principled distinction between novels, poems, and plays, for example, and science articles, biographies, essays, comics, and advertising material.²¹

Opinions, then, are sharply divided on the ‘comics as literature’ question. As I have already mentioned, I believe there is a very natural explanation for this divide. But first, we need to clear up some potential sources of confusion.

A Few Points About the ‘Comics as Literature’ Question

I suspect that much of the resistance to treating comics as literature stems from various combinations of the following thoughts: (1) the view is mistaken because there are clear cases of comics that are not literature; (2) the view is misguided because treating comics as literature would entail ignoring their visual element; and (3) the view is problematic because it fails to recognize what is distinctive about the art form of comics. Despite the pull of these considerations, none should lead us to give up a substantive ‘comics as literature’ thesis.

First, the view that *some* comics are literature is, in fact, much more plausible than the view that *all* comics are literature. But the fact that some comics are not literature does not impugn the ‘comics as literature’ thesis if that thesis is understood as expressing an existential claim rather than a universal one. Suppose, for example, one thinks that literary status entails artistic status. Then, the examples of non-art comics that I mentioned in the opening paragraph will also provide examples of non-literary comics, but comics which are art will not be excluded from the realm of the literary for this reason. On the other hand, suppose one denies that literary status entails art status (or one is simply interested in what Davies and Matheson call the ‘extended’ sense of literature).²² Still, some comics plausibly fall outside of this category, because they fail to contain any words. That is, there are wordless comics (sometimes called ‘mute’ or ‘pantomime’ comics), and these do not seem to meet a necessary minimal condition for being counted literature in *any* sense.²³ Finally, suppose one assumes that LITERATURE is an evaluative concept in a strong sense; that is, that possessing some (high) degree of value is a necessary condition for literary status. Then some comics will fail to meet the condition since COMIC is not an evaluative notion in this sense and there are truly valueless examples of the medium. But other comics—such as those I mentioned in the introduction and first section of this essay—surely meet such an evaluative condition. In short, the only reasonable version of the ‘comics as literature’ thesis is one that is committed to some but not all comics counting as literature. (Presumably the thesis is most interesting if it implies that many comics are literature). And, hence, the putative non-literary status of *Dazzler*, *Superman*, and other superhero comics would provide no good reason to reject the thesis in question.

21 David Davies and Carl Matheson (eds), *Contemporary Readings in the Philosophy of Literature: An Analytic Approach* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2008), p. xii.

22 This sense of ‘literature’ picks out ‘writings in non-artistic genres . . . that are taken to share with literary artworks some of the qualities for which the latter are valued’ (*ibid.*).

23 See, for example, Eric Drooker’s *Flood!: A Novel in Pictures* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1992).

Second, it is clear that treating some comics as literature would not, in fact, entail ignoring their visual or pictorial elements. There is a long history of illustrated literature as well as significant traditions of shaped and concrete poetry. In fact, although the term ‘concrete poetry’ was coined in the middle of the last century, and the art it referred to was a modernist invention, pattern or shaped poetry goes back many centuries—at least to the Greeks if not beyond. If George Herbert’s poem ‘Easter Wings’ counts as literature and is properly treated as such, then treating a work of art as literature cannot preclude attending to its visual elements. Similarly, if children’s literature is accepted as fully fledged literature, then it is obvious that illustration can be central to a literary genre. Any approach to illustrated children’s literature that ignored its visual aspect would be an impoverished approach indeed.

Third, it is not the case that categorizing comics as literature would entail ignoring the distinctive features of the art form as seems to be suggested in the Moore quote above. Literature is a meta-form. That is, it contains a number of art forms within it, most notably poetry, prose, and dramatic literature. To recognize that poems are works of literature is not to ignore what is distinctive about poetry; rather, it is to recognize that appreciating poetry as poetry involves appreciating it as literature while at the same time appreciating it as a distinctive form of literature. The existence and significance of this sort of double categorization is typical in the arts since artistic categories (styles, genres, art forms) both embed within one another and overlap. Sestinas and villanelles are properly appreciated as instances of particular poetic forms and of poetry more generally (as well as of literature). Certain horror movies must be seen as both examples of the horror genre and of the category of German Expressionism if they are to be properly understood and evaluated. And those comics which are literature (if they are literature) are properly appreciated both as comics *and* as instances of literature.

For Comics as Literature

So what reasons are there for thinking that some comics fall into the category of literature? I have mentioned some suggestive similarities between comics and literature in the introduction to this paper. And even critics of the ‘comics as literature’ view are willing to admit that there are significant resemblances between comics and literature. As mentioned above, Douglas Wolk points out that ‘they use words, they’re printed in books, they have narrative content’.²⁴ David Carrier argues that the ‘book-size scale’ of comics is one of their essential features.²⁵ But, of course, no number of these resemblances entails that comics are literature, and not all comics use words, are printed in books, or have narrative content.²⁶ (Nor is it clear that they all are—or must be—of book-size scale.) There is, however, a very good reason to think that at least some comics fit the bill. Despite the apparent resistance of some philosophers and theorists of literature to recognizing comics

24 Wolk, *Reading Comics*, p. 14.

25 David Carrier, *The Aesthetics of Comics* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State U.P., 2000), p. 74.

26 See Aaron Meskin, ‘Defining Comics?’, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 65 (2007), pp. 369–379.

as literature, an examination of a wide range of proposed definitions of literature suggests that at least some actual (and many possible) comics fall into the category. That is, even if one is sceptical of the adequacy and value of these definitions and of the definitional project in general,²⁷ the fact that a wide range of definitions of literature imply that some comics fall into that category provides strong—albeit defeasible—evidence in favour of the ‘comics as literature’ thesis.

Here is a representative list of definitions or characterizations of literature:

- (i) “‘literary discourse’ might be defined as ‘discourse that is either an imitation illocutionary act or distinctly above the norm in its ratio of implicit to explicit meaning’”.²⁸
- (ii) ‘A work *w* is a work of literature if and only if *w* is produced in a linguistic medium, and,
 - (a) *w* is a novel, short story, tale, drama, or poem, and the writer of *w* intended that it possesses aesthetic, cognitive, or interpretation-centered value, and the work is written with sufficient technical skill for it to be possible to take that intention seriously, or
 - (b) *w* possesses aesthetic, cognitive or interpretation-centered value to a significant degree, or . . .’²⁹
- (iii) ‘A text is identified as a literary work by recognizing the author’s intention that the text is produced and meant to be read within a framework of conventions defining the practice (constituting the institution) of literature.’³⁰
- (iv) ‘The definition of literature as highly valued writing . . .’³¹

Now it seems to me that the only serious question that these definitions raise *vis-à-vis* comics is whether they meet what I shall call the ‘linguistic medium condition’. That is, is it appropriate to count comics as texts or discourses or as produced in a linguistic medium or as examples of writing? For if the answer to these questions is ‘yes’, then it is hard for me to see what could possibly exclude all comics from the category of literature.³² Many comics are fictional (which is what Beardsley and others were getting at with their talk of imitation or pretend illocutionary acts). As is suggested by the discussion in the first section of this paper, lots of comics possess aesthetic, cognitive, and interpretation-centered value to a significant degree. Some comics (e.g. Bechdel’s aforementioned *Fun Home*) are plausibly

27 See Aaron Meskin, ‘From Defining Art to Defining the Individual Arts: The Role of Theory in the Philosophies of Arts’, in Kathleen Stock and Katherine Thomson-Jones (eds), *New Waves in Aesthetics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 125–149.

28 Monroe Beardsley, ‘The Concept of Literature’, in John and Lopes (eds) *Philosophy of Literature*, p. 57.

29 Robert Stecker, ‘What Is Literature?’, in John and Lopes (eds), *Philosophy of Literature*, p. 71.

30 Lamarque and Olsen, *Truth, Fiction and Literature*, pp. 255–256..

31 Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, p. 11.

32 The same result seems to follow from Christopher New’s ‘family resemblance’ account of literature. See his *Philosophy of Literature: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 34–37. At least some comics possess some of the features that justify our identifying a discourse as a work of literature (fictionality, a significant amount of figurative language, etc.).

intended to be read within the framework of literary practice. Many comics (e.g. the award winners mentioned above) are highly valued by some. And so on.

But do comics meet the linguistic medium condition? Are comics examples of writing?³³ Are they texts? Again, it does not seem to be the case that all comics meet the condition. Wordless comics are not texts in the robust sense which is invoked in the aforementioned definitions. Mute comics are not made in a linguistic medium. Eisner was too quick to claim that the images in comics are used as a language since, for example, the visual meaning of comics does not seem to be compositional as it is in natural language. But the vast majority of comics do contain many words. So it would seem that there is some reason to count them as meeting the relevant condition. And the mere presence of pictorial or other visual elements in comics cannot be enough to exclude them from the category of literature. The illustrations in Dickens's works by Cruikshank and others do not undercut the literary status of those works.

Yes, but perhaps the illustrations in Dickens's novels are not essential to them. One would, I think, count as having had full access to *Oliver Twist* even without seeing Cruikshank's illustrations. And whatever one thinks about the Dickens case, the fact that certain works of literature allow for many distinct illustrated editions suggests that their illustrations are not essential to them. Dante's *Inferno* is a good example of this.³⁴ While it might be argued that certain illustrations are essential to specific editions of the *Inferno*, they are simply not essential to the literary work itself. But this seems radically different from the standard comic where the pictorial (and other visual) elements do seem essential to the work and to its appreciation. One has not had full access to *Watchmen* if one does not get to see Dave Gibbons's artwork. And a differently illustrated copy of *Black Hole*, Charles Burns's disturbing graphic novel about mutating teenagers in 1970s Seattle, would count as a different comic. Perhaps it is the fact that the pictorial and/or visual elements of comics are essential to them that precludes them from counting as literature.

To think so would be a mistake. The various forms of visual poetry that were mentioned above seem to have their visual elements essentially. (No full appreciation of *Easter Wings* without seeing *Easter Wings* or, at least, having heard its shape described.) A bit closer to the case of comics, there are examples where pictorial or other visual elements are essentially embedded in the text of a literary work. For example, one cannot fully appreciate Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* or Kurt Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions* without seeing the images that they contain. But I do not think anyone would claim that *this* is good reason to deny that they are literature. We do not have good reason to exclude comics from the sphere of literature merely because they contain pictorial or other visual elements essentially.

If comics were like those other great hybrid art forms opera and musical theatre, then we might legitimately deny that comics themselves were literature while at the same time admitting that they *contained* literature in them.³⁵ Works of musical theatre are not simply

33 Perhaps 'writing' is not quite right since oral literature is plausibly literature. Hence my focus on whether comics are texts or are made in a linguistic medium.

34 See Dominic McIver Lopes, *Sight and Sensibility: Evaluating Pictures* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2005), pp. 170–179.

35 Much more on artistic hybridity below.

works of music, although they are partially composed of music. That is, one can extract the music from a work of musical theatre whole, as it were. The same is plausibly true of operas. And that is why concert performances and sound recordings of operas, as well as original cast recording of musicals, function successfully to provide the audience with a certain kind of artistic access. They do not provide listeners with a route to operas or musicals themselves, but they do provide them with access to the music that is part of those complete art works. Alas, comics are not opera, not even comic opera. There is no linguistic entity that can be extracted from the standard comic which stands on its own as art in its own right, let alone literature. Subtract the theatre from a work of musical theatre and you get music. But subtract the pictures from a comic book and you get nothing more than the linguistic part of a comic book.³⁶ Comics do not, then, merely contain literature in them.

Do we, then, have good reason to count some comics as literature? There is at least one serious objection to this line of thought that is worth considering. The objection starts from the commonplace observation that the images in comics seem much more significant than do the images in most of the examples of illustrated literature that were discussed above. Perhaps it is the significance of the visual element in comics that precludes them from being literature. According to comics historian David Kunzle, comics involve ‘a preponderance of image over text’.³⁷ At first glance, something like this seems right. And it might be thought that such an appeal to ‘preponderance of image’ could enable one to exclude comics from the category of literature. If x is a comic only if it involves such a preponderance of image over text, then it is natural to think that y is literature only if it involves a preponderance of text over image. If such claims were correct, then no comic could be a work of literature.

The key to evaluating such a proposal is, of course, getting clear on what is meant by ‘preponderance’. Kunzle himself is ambiguous. At one point he talks about what ‘carries the burden of the narrative’.³⁸ At another point he talks of ‘relative size’ of the images and the text.³⁹ But neither one of these senses of ‘preponderance’ seem true to the phenomena. There are some clear cases of comics in which the burden of the narrative must be carried by the text and not the images, since the images contained in them do little or no narrative work. For example, some of the collaborations between Harvey Pekar and Robert Crumb that are found in Pekar’s *American Splendor* collections consist mostly or entirely of sequences of largely similar ‘medium shots’ of Harvey telling a story.⁴⁰ And there are cases of

36 Of course there are complete works that go into the making of some comic books—some comic books involve the original production of a complete script. Some of these scripts might be counted as works of literature. But such scripts are not part of the final comic in any sense—they stand in roughly the same relation to the final comic as a shooting script stands to a completed film. For an example of such a script, see Grant Morrison (w) and Dave McKean (i), *Batman: Arkham Asylum 15th Anniversary Edition* (New York: DC Comics, 2004).

37 David Kunzle, *The Early Comic Strip: Narrative Strips and Pictures Stories in the European Broadsheet from c. 1450 to 1825* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973), p. 2.

38 *Ibid.*, p. x

39 *Ibid.*

40 See, for example, Harvey Pekar (w) and Robert Crumb (i), ‘The Harvey Pekar Name Story’, in Pekar *et al.*, *American Splendor: Ordinary Life is Pretty Complex Stuff* (New York: Ballantine, 2003), n.p.

comics in which the text takes up more space than the pictures (Phoebe Gloeckner's 'I Hate Comics' published in *The Comics Journal Special Edition, Winter 2002* is a good example), as well as cases of children's literature where the pictures take up more room than the text. That such conditions could not help exclude comics from the literary—let alone serve as a defining condition of comics—is not surprising. The decisions as to what element of a comic will carry the narrative (if there is one!) and as to the relative size of imagery versus text are *stylistic* decisions. Such stylistic decisions are unlikely to underwrite necessary conditions for membership in an art form category.

Similarly, one might be tempted to exclude comics from the literary sphere by appeal to the *aesthetic* preponderance of images in comics. For it might seem that the images in a comic are ultimately more important or more significant to its evaluation and appreciation than the other elements (e.g. dialogue, text). Surely the text in a work of literature is always more aesthetically important than any images in it. Again, these are overgeneralizations. When it comes to many comics, the pictures are arguably more important to their overall appreciation and evaluation than the text or story. But this is also a matter of stylistic choice. Just as there are films in which the sound is plausibly more important than the images (e.g. Jonathan Demme's *Swimming to Cambodia* and *Stop Making Sense*), so too there are comics where the words and dialogue seem more aesthetically important than the pictures. In fact, the contemporary humorous newspaper comic strip provides an example of an entire genre of comics in which is the case. Anyone who thinks the images in *Cathy* or *Dilbert* are of more aesthetic significance than the words has simply failed to grasp the nature and success conditions for works in that genre.

It is, on the other hand, plausible that some sort of preponderance condition might be used to mark a very broad distinction between the two categories in question. On just about any conception of 'preponderance', a preponderance of text over image is *standard* with respect to the category of literature and *contra-standard* for the category of comics—vice versa for a preponderance of image over text.⁴¹ But this would not provide a basis for denying that the two categories overlap since we are clearly not dealing here with necessary or sufficient conditions. And significant overlap is all we need in order to establish an interesting 'comics as literature' thesis.

The upshot is that despite the intuitive appeal of the preponderance condition for distinguishing comics from literature, I do not see an obvious way of harnessing it to exclude all of the former from falling into the latter category. There is, then, good reason to think some comics are works of literature. But I shall now suggest that there are also some good reasons for thinking that comics—or at least the vast majority of them—cannot count as literature.

Against Comics as Literature

I have just argued that an appeal to a 'preponderance of image over text' will not straightforwardly provide a basis for rejecting the 'comics as literature' thesis. But those attracted to various Wittgensteinian or Wittgensteinian-inspired approaches to understanding concepts

41 For the notions of standard and contra-standard invoked here, see Walton, 'Categories of Art', p. 339.

(e.g. family resemblance, cluster, or prototype accounts) may insist that the presence of a preponderance of image over text is *critical* (although not sufficient) for falling outside of the extension of the concept of literature. Perhaps—as Berys Gaut might put it—some such preponderance ‘counts as a matter of conceptual necessity toward an object’s falling under’ the concept NOT-LITERATURE.⁴² Now Gaut’s particular account of what ‘counting toward’ amounts to is problematic,⁴³ but the general idea here is not implausible and one need not deny that the concept of literature admits of a traditional definition in order to accept the crucial claim. The fact that a work contains a preponderance of images over text (in whatever sense of ‘preponderance’ you like) plausibly provides defeasible evidence that it is not literature; that is, although such a fact does not entail that the object in question is not literature it surely makes it *more likely* that it is not literature. Put differently, if some preponderance of image over text is truly contra-standard with respect to the category of literature, then it is a feature which ‘tends to *disqualify* works as members of the category’.⁴⁴ I have argued that it cannot straightforwardly disqualify something from being literature, but the tendency to do so is enough to motivate the argument. It is precisely from such a claim that someone who denies that comics are literature will start to make their case.

Not all comics contain a preponderance of image over text, and any such preponderance we find in a particular comic will not by itself exclude it from the category of literature. But if we find a range of other features possessed by all or most comics that are also contra-standard for literature (or that are critical for the concept NOT-LITERATURE), significant pressure will be exerted on the ‘comics as literature’ thesis. We will either have reason to doubt that any version of the thesis is true or—perhaps more likely—have good reason to restrict the range of the thesis to a very narrow selection of atypical comics (e.g. ones that are mostly text). Such a restriction would significantly reduce the interest of the thesis.

I believe that we can put significant pressure on the thesis by this route. Consider, for example, the putative distinction between the autographic and allographic arts as introduced by Nelson Goodman in his 1976 book *Languages of Art*.⁴⁵ Here is how Goodman first presents it:

Let us speak of a work of art as *autographic* if and only if the distinction between original and forgery of it is significant; or better, if and only if even the most exact duplication of it does not thereby count as genuine. If a work of art is autographic, we may also call that art autographic. Thus painting is autographic, music nonautographic, or *allographic*.⁴⁶

42 Berys Gaut, ‘“Art” as a Cluster Concept’, in Noël Carroll (ed.), *Theories of Art Today* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), p. 26. If you do not think NOT-LITERATURE is a concept, then you may consider the possibility that a preponderance of image over text counts *against* an object falling under the concept LITERATURE.

43 See Aaron Meskin, ‘The Cluster Account of Art Reconsidered’, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 47 (2007), pp. 388–400.

44 Walton, ‘Categories of Art’, p. 339.

45 Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1976).

46 *Ibid.*, p. 113.

There are problems and unclarity with Goodman's initial gloss of the distinction.⁴⁷ Moreover, Goodman's subsequent account of the autographic/allographic distinction in terms of whether or not a work of art is 'amenable to notation' is problematic.⁴⁸ As Jerrold Levinson argues, it is plausible that no actual works of art are such that the identity conditions for genuine instances are completely specifiable in terms of a notation.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, I believe that Goodman was pointing towards a number of important and related distinctions that we find in our appreciative practices. Most significantly for the purposes of this discussion, there is the intuitive distinction between works of art that do and do not seem to allow for a certain kind of forgery—forgery that involves the deceptive practice of producing inauthentic items indiscernible from authentic instances of such works.

If you accept this distinction, then it is clear that there is an important difference between standard comics and standard works of literature. Comics—at least those that are standardly produced—are autographic, and they would have been characterized as such by Goodman.⁵⁰ The production of an authentic instance of a comic requires mechanical reproduction from a template or, perhaps, another authentic instance.⁵¹ It is in virtue of this that traditionally made comics are intuitively forgeable in the way described above—something may be falsely presented as if it were mechanically produced in the right way. Moreover, comics are typically *completely* autographic; that is, they contain no aesthetically relevant spatial parts that are allographic.⁵² In particular, it is not the case that typical comics combine autographic images with allographic text. The lettering in comics is aesthetically significant and the physically embodied text in a comic functions more than merely linguistically. In most cases, the words as they appear on page must then be produced by means of the relevant template or they are not genuine. Relettering a comic by hand produces something that does not count as a genuine instance of the original.⁵³ The same seems true of the other features of the standard comic book page: panel borders and speech balloons also appear to be autographic elements.

Occasionally comics contain bits of typeset text. In some cases (e.g. in Posy Simmonds's recent graphic novel *Tamara Drewe*) these are plausibly allographic elements of the work. But I have not been denying that comics may contain some allographic elements. The key points here are that being autographic is standard for the category of comics, and that being

47 For a sympathetic but critical discussion see Jerrold Levinson, 'Autographic and Allographic Art Revisited', in *Music, Art, and Metaphysics: Essays in Philosophical Aesthetics* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell U.P., 1990), pp. 89–107.

48 'Since an art seems to be allographic just insofar as it is amenable to notation' (Goodman, *Languages of Art*, p. 121.)

49 Levinson, 'Autographic and Allographic', pp. 100–101.

50 David Carrier agrees: 'Comics are an autographic art with, potentially, an indefinite number of copies of the original image' (*Aesthetics of Comics*, p. 63).

51 In the case of many traditionally produced comics the particular template is a printing plate. Some comics are produced by photocopying. In such cases, the original drawn and inked art may function as the template.

52 I assume here that it makes sense to talk of comics having spatial parts. I do not believe that this is an especially problematic assumption. Since it is uncontentious that the tokens of comics have spatial parts, my claim about the lack of allographic spatial parts in comics could be easily translated into talk about the parts of comics that correspond to the spatial parts of their tokens.

53 And so, letterers count as among the artists who make a comic. This is reflected in the credits that appear in standard commercial comics. And this is true even though the letterers of mainstream comics nowadays commonly use graphics software such as Adobe Illustrator.

fully or completely autographic is at least typical of comics. Perhaps this latter feature is even standard or criterial (although not necessary) for the category.

It would be too quick to distinguish comics from literature by combining this result with Goodman's claim that literature is allographic.⁵⁴ The claim that literature is allographic is an overgeneralization. Most essentially illustrated literary works *do* require mechanical reproduction from a template for the production of authentic copies and are, in virtue of this, forgeable in the relevant sense. Still, these autographic works of literature such as Safran Foer's aforementioned *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* are (except perhaps for some very rare cases—see below) best understood as merely *partially* autographic. That is, one can cleanly and clearly distinguish their forgeable autographic parts from their non-forgeable allographic parts. A specific template is only required to produce *part or parts* (i.e. distinct spatial parts) of the authentic copy of *Tristram Shandy*. Cases which suggest the possibility (perhaps actuality) of fully autographic works of literature (e.g. *A Pictorial Guide to the Lakeland Fells* by Alfred Wainwright, Spike Milligan's children's book, *Badjelly the Witch*, and Nick Bantock's hand-illustrated and hand-lettered epistolary Griffin and Sabine novels) are extremely rare. Being fully autographic is contra-standard for being literature.

Most comics, then, are fully autographic but being fully autographic provides evidence that something is *not* a work of literature. Combine this with the earlier observations about the relation between images and words in the two art forms and it looks as if the 'comics as literature' thesis is under threat. Perhaps there are exceptional comics that are not fully autographic and in which there is a preponderance of text over image. But if these were the only comics that counted as literature, then the 'comics as literature' thesis would be rather uninteresting. Of course it is still *possible* that a work may count as literature even if it is fully autographic and contains a preponderance of image over text since we are dealing with defeasible evidence not entailment. But these are not the only significant differences between standard comics and standard works of literature. As we discover more standard features of comics that are contra-standard for literature, the evidence that typical comics are not literature appears to become overwhelming.

Layout is important to ordinary comic books to a degree that is not the case with ordinary works of literature. Many artistic effects produced by comic books are generated by particular page layouts. Change the page layout of a comic book and you may significantly change the aesthetic and artistic properties of it. But this is not typically the case with works of literature—especially non-poetic literature. You may change the layout of a standard novel, short story, or work of dramatic literature without having any aesthetic or artistic effect on it whatsoever. Even in the case of poems—where line length is often aesthetically significant—larger-scale features of layout are often artistically insignificant. So, for example, page breaks do not usually play a significant role in poetry even if line breaks do.⁵⁵ Moreover, the fact that most poems can flourish purely orally, and hence are

54 Goodman, *Languages of Art*, p. 114.

55 I believe that this is true with respect to most poetry. I have on my desk three books that contain Phillip Larkin's poem 'The Whitsun Weddings'—each one presents the poem in a different layout. But I cannot say that my appreciation of the poem is affected by this. On the other hand, it is true that layout matters very much to concrete poetry. See below for further discussion

not essentially tied to texts, suggests that physical layout is not ultimately what is aesthetically or artistically essential to them either. And when layout *is* important to works of prose literature, as in works such as *Tristram Shandy*, we may typically cleanly separate the parts where it matters from the parts in which it does not. In short, I suggest that the aesthetic significance of layout is standard for comics but contra-standard for literature. Having a layout that is aesthetically significant (or perhaps having *most* or *every* aspect of layout aesthetically significant) tends to disqualify something from being literature—it provides defeasible evidence that the representation in question is not literature. But it is a typical feature of comics.

Moreover, comic books (at least all standardly produced comic books) present traces of the physical actions of the artists who produce them.⁵⁶ When you look at a standard comic, you see traces of the actions that the penciller made in producing the images. Ditto for the letterer when the comic is hand-lettered. But this is not the case in the case of standard works of literature. Again, there are exceptions. *Tristram Shandy* and *Breakfast of Champions* contain traces of Sterne's and Vonnegut's own drawing. But—again—these are typically discrete and separable instances inside a work that does not present traces of his actions. The presentation of traces of artists' actions is standard for comics but contra-standard for works of literature.

There are many other related differences between comics and standard works of literature. But I have pointed to some important differences which appear to put some pressure on the 'comics as literature' thesis. Typical comics have many pictures. In fact, one might even say that in some very rough sense there is a preponderance of pictures over words in most comics. But this is contra-standard for literature—the presence of a lot of pictures surely gives us defeasible evidence that we are not dealing with literature. Typical comics are fully or wholly autographic. But being fully or wholly autographic is contra-standard for literature. Layout is typically aesthetically and artistically significant in comics but this is contra-standard for literature. Comics typically show us the traces of artistic actions in a way that is contra-standard for literature. The upshot is that we have a number of defeasible reasons to think that typical comics are not literature. But the best examples of comics we have—the comics canon if you like—are typical in this sense. *Maus*, *Persepolis*, *Krazy Kat*, *Little Nemo*, *Watchmen*, *Tintin*, *Peanuts*, *Jimmy Corrigan* are all dominated (in some sense at least) by pictures and are fully autographic. Their layouts are artistically significant and they present the traces of artists' actions. We have, then, some reason to think that the very best comics are not literature. And if this were the case, then the truth of some 'comics as literature' thesis would be of only very limited interest.

Resolving an Impasse: Comics as a Hybrid

If the arguments above are any good, then we have reached an impasse. We have reasons to think (some) comics are literature, but have seen there also appear to be substantive differences

56 One exception is the case of photocomics. But such comics contain other traces (namely traces of the objects and scenes depicted photographically) that distinguish them from works of literature.

between typical comics and standard forms of literature. These differences exert some pressure against the ‘comics as literature’ thesis.

How can we resolve the apparent impasse? I suggest that we can explain the tug-o’-war between the two views about comics by recognizing that the art form of comics is a hybrid art form among whose ancestors is the art form of literature. This in and of itself does not answer the question of whether comics are, in fact, literature. But it does do a great deal to explain the relevant phenomena that have been sketched above. And it should help answer the questions about comics that drive the debate about the ‘comics as literature’ thesis.

I am not the first person to suggest that comics are a hybrid form. David Kunzle claims that the comic strip ‘is essentially a hybrid form’.⁵⁷ And Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven claim that ‘graphic narrative’ (their preferred term for the art form) is

hybrid in the following sense: comics is a mass cultural art form drawing on both high and low art indexes and references; comics is multigeneric, composed, often ingeniously, from widely different genres and subgenres; and, most importantly, comics is constituted in verbal and visual narrative that do not merely synthesize.⁵⁸

But aside from Chute and DeKoven’s tendentious and grammatically perverse claims, there has been little clear explanation of why comics should be considered a hybrid. Moreover, there have been a number of authors who have criticized the view that comics are a hybrid. Roger Sabin states that comics ‘are not some hybrid form between “literature” and “art” . . . but a medium in their own right’,⁵⁹ and Scott McCloud argues that ‘it’s a mistake to see comics as a mere hybrid of graphic arts and prose fiction. What happens between these panels is a kind of magic only comics can create.’⁶⁰ So why should we count comics as a hybrid?

Not for the reasons offered by Chute and DeKoven. Comics may be largely mass-cultural, but not all comics are examples of mass-culture since every art form allows for the possibility of an avant-garde. Being multigeneric does not seem to entail hybridity in any significant sense—it is hard to think of any art form that is restricted to a single genre and surely none are essentially restricted in such a way.⁶¹ With regard to the alleged non-synthesizing nature of narrative in comics I have already mentioned that not all comics contain verbal elements, nor are all comics narrative. And verbal and visual narrative may combine in a variety of ways in comics, including combination by synthesis.

57 Kunzle, *The Early Comic Strip*, p. 2.

58 Hillary L. Chute and Marianne DeKoven, ‘Introduction: Graphic Narrative’, *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 52 (2006), p. 769.

59 Roger Sabin, *Adult Comics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 9.

60 Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics* (Northampton, MA: Kitchen Sink Press, 1993), p. 92.

61 I take it that they are suggesting that the *art form* is composed of examples from widely different genres. If they are referring to individual comics, then it is simply false that all comics are multigeneric in any substantive sense (i.e. over and above the fact that categories of art embed). Some comics stay within one traditional genre entirely (e.g. certain horror comics). And if the point is merely that *some* comics exemplify multiple genres, then it is hard to see what art form would not count as hybrid—since it is plausible that every art form has instances that belong to more than one genre.

Here is what Chute and DeKoven say about the way in which words and images combine in comics:

In comics, the images are not illustrative of the text, but comprise a separate narrative thread that moves forward in time in a different way than the prose text, which also moves the reader forward in time. The medium of comics is cross-discursive because it is composed of verbal and visual narratives that do not simply blend together, creating a unified whole, but rather remain distinct.⁶²

There is something close to right about this. The images in comics do not *typically* function simply as illustrations since they determine narrative content in a way that paradigmatic illustrations of literary works do not.⁶³ But for this very reason it is a mistake to treat the images and text as comprising *separate* narrative threads. If the images and text in a standard commercial comic are prised apart one typically does not get two narrative threads even though it may look that way—instead one gets a mere temporally ordered picture sequence and a temporally ordered text sequence. And as I have already mentioned, not all comics are narrative and not all comics have text, so there is another reason to reject the Chute–DeKoven account of hybridity. Nor, to be precise, need narrative in comics move forward in time. More significantly, it is a mistake to characterize standard narrative comics as containing separate narrative threads that *remain distinct*. Image and text determine narrative content in standard comics by working together (i.e. by ‘blending’ in some important sense) rather than remaining distinct as do text and pictures in traditional illustrated literature. Words and pictures in comics do then typically combine to create a unified, albeit complex, whole.

So in what sense are comics a hybrid art form? Perhaps the most sophisticated account of hybridity in the aesthetic sphere has been put forward by Jerrold Levinson in his paper ‘Hybrid Art Forms’.⁶⁴ Levinson offers a purely historical notion of artistic hybridity: ‘Hybrid art forms are art forms arising from the *actual* combination or interpenetration of earlier art forms.’⁶⁵ That is, an art form is a hybrid only if it is actually descended from two or more distinct art forms (or, as Levinson suggests, an art form and some other technology or practice).⁶⁶ Moreover, attributions of hybridity are, according to Levinson, typically ‘relative’ or context-sensitive; that is, we typically count an art form as a hybrid only if its artistic ancestors belong to the not-too-distant past.⁶⁷ So it is plausible that at any particular juncture in history there will be at least some art forms that we appropriately

62 Chute and DeKoven, ‘Introduction’, p. 769.

63 Cruickshank’s illustrations do not determine the content of Dickens’s novels. But note that the pictures in many works of children’s literature do not function solely in an illustrative fashion either since the narrative is forwarded both by words and pictures working together. See, for example, Maurice Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are* (London: Harper Collins, 1963).

64 Jerrold Levinson, ‘Hybrid Art Forms’, in *Music, Art, and Metaphysics: Essays in Philosophical Aesthetics* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell U.P., 1990), pp. 26–36.

65 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

66 *Ibid.*, p. 29, footnote 2.

67 *Ibid.*, p. 30.

count as non-hybrid. (Levinson talks of ‘thoroughbred’ or ‘pure’ art forms, but this may be misleading as some will no doubt infer from this language that an evaluative hierarchy is implied by these terms. To do so would be mistaken, but it is safer simply to distinguish the hybrid from the non-hybrid.)

On this historical conception of hybridity, the question of whether the art form of comics is a hybrid is not a question about the relationship between the words and images in them (which, after all, can vary widely), but rather a question about genealogy. That is, the question of hybridity becomes a largely historical question: when and how did the art form of comics develop? Did it develop independently, or is it a product of the coming together of distinct art forms?

These are historical questions. But determining whether or not the art form is the product of the combination or interpenetration of other art forms looks as if it may require answering a broadly conceptual question first. To determine when and how comics developed it appears that we may need to have some way of determining whether certain contested cases are or are not members of the category. It is likely to make all the difference in the world if comics are seen as a largely contemporary art form—born in the nineteenth century as David Carrier and Roger Sabin argue—or they have been around for millennia as Scott McCloud claims.⁶⁸ In fact, one might interpret McCloud’s resistance to the idea that comics are a hybrid as a reflection of his view that comics have been with us for many centuries. If we only judge an art form to be a hybrid if its ancestors are in the not-too-distant past, then McCloud’s view of comics would seem to imply that they could not count as a hybrid no matter how the text and images relate.

I believe there are good reasons for treating comics as a modern invention. While the inclusion of pre-Columbian painting and the Bayeux Tapestry appears to endow comics with a long and significant history, such a strategy runs the risk of so eviscerating the category that it becomes critically uninteresting.⁶⁹ If this is right, then we are better off following Sabin and others and treating comics as having developed in the nineteenth century as a product of the intermarriage of a range of art forms and technologies including literature, the art of caricature, popular printmaking (especially satirical printmaking), and pictorial narrative. And if *this* is right, then the art form is a hybrid among whose ancestors are literature and print-making.

Of course, their development in the nineteenth century does not entail that comics are a hybrid descended from literature. In the first place, one could accept that comics are a relatively modern invention but deny that they are the product of the joining together of distinct art forms; that is, deny that they are a hybrid at all. Perhaps comics are the product of internal development or evolution within an art form (pictorial narrative? printmaking? caricature? graphic satire?) rather than the offspring of the two or more distinct art forms.⁷⁰ In the second place, comics might be a hybrid but one that is not descended from literature.

68 Carrier, *The Aesthetics of Comics*, p. 4; Roger Sabin, *Comics, Comix & Graphic Novels: A History of Comic Art* (London: Phaidon Press, 1996), p. 11; McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, pp. 14–15.

69 See Meskin, ‘Defining Comics’, p. 374.

70 Jonathan Friday suggested this to me in discussion.

Both forms of this challenge can be met if it can be established that literature is one of the ancestors of comics. For if comics are descended from literature, then they are surely not the product of purely internal artistic development since a picture-making medium of some sort or other must be in their background too. And if we abstract away from the details of which particular objects count as the first comics (for that is beside the point), then it looks to me as if it was the combination of literature (or, at a minimum, verbal storytelling) with pictorial narrative and printmaking that distinguishes the work of comics pioneer Rodolphe Töpffer (and, arguably some of the work of Hogarth and other English satirical printmakers) from the long prior history of pictorial narrative.⁷¹

Furthermore, a weaker but still significant form of the hybridity claim looks as if it is on even stronger ground. Suppose comics in general are not a hybrid art form—it would nevertheless be plausible that the contemporary graphic novel (or perhaps a genre within that category) is a hybrid that involves the grafting together of the art form of comics with literary genres such as the novel and the autobiography or memoir. That is, there are real differences in subject matters addressed and themes dealt with between certain contemporary graphic novels (largely but not entirely post-*Maus*) and the comics that came before it, and this is best explained by understanding a new artistic hybrid to have arisen from the interbreeding of comics and certain literary genres.⁷² In fact, I believe that ‘true’ graphic novels (as opposed to mere sequences of comic books that are packaged in graphic novel form) are, in fact, a product of double hybridization (i.e. the cross-breeding of comics—itsself a hybrid—with literary genres). But even if the graphic novel is just a single hybrid, this would be enough to underwrite the claims I make regarding hybridity and its significance for the ‘comics as literature’ thesis.

What is that significance? I suggest that the hybrid nature of comics (and/or graphic novels) explains the categorial conflict that I have sketched above. (For the sake of argument I shall assume from now on that comics in general—rather than the graphic novel genre in particular—are a hybrid art form.) It is because comics are descended from literature that they share so many features in common with paradigmatic works of literature. But the fact that the art form is also descended from non-literary forms explains (at least in large part) the dramatic ways in which they differ from the run-of-the-mill novel or short story. In particular, the ancestral relation that popular printmaking (e.g. intaglio and lithography,) bears to comics does much to explain the various distinctions between comics and standard works of literature that I sketched above. These prints are typically predominantly pictorial or imagistic. They are autographic multiples like comics. Prints provide visual access to the traces of artist’s actions in a way that novels do not. So hybridity seems to explain much of what needs explaining.

71 For some examples of pictorial narrative in the pre-comics era, see Herbert L. Kessler and Marianna Shreve Simpson (eds), *Pictorial Narrative in Antiquity and the Middle Ages (Studies in the History of Art, Vol. 16)* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1985).

72 ‘In a publishing world just getting comfortable with long-form comic books as graphic novels, Mr. Ware’s comics heralded the arrival of a more rarefied genre: graphic literature’ (Neil Strauss, ‘Creating Literature, One Comic Book at a Time; Chris Ware’s Tales Mine His Own Life and Heart’, *New York Times*, 4 April 2001).

In fact, now that we have this diachronic notion of hybridity in focus, we can see that it helps to make sense of some interesting exceptional cases. For example, some webcomics differ ontologically from ordinary comics with respect to the ways in which their instances are created. But webcomics are a hybrid art form created through the bringing together of the art form of comics and the technology of computer graphics, and it is precisely because webcomics are descended from computer graphics that they have inherited the ontological nature of digital objects. Photocomics are another hybrid—descended from comics and photography, they inherit from that latter medium its distinctive mode of representation. Concrete poetry is a paradigmatic artistic hybrid formed by the combination of poetry and graphic design, and it is descent from the latter that explains why it provides an example of a genre of literature in which layout matters.

Now it is worth noting that hybridity is consistent with falling into an ancestral category. Some hybrids are mules (i.e. neither horses nor donkeys), but not all are. Concrete poetry is a form of poetry. Digital photography is a form of photography. So the fact that the art form of comics is a hybrid form—descended from literature and some other art forms and technologies—does not entail that comics are not literature. And we have already noted that literature is a meta-form which contains a range of art forms within it. We have not, then, yet settled the issue of whether comics are literature.

Towards a Conclusion: What Matters?

Are some comics literature? If I am right, the art form is a hybrid one, and this hybridity explains many of the relevant phenomena. But it does not settle whether the ‘comics as literature’ view is correct. But why do we need to settle it? And how could we settle the issue if we needed to.

Suppose we treat the question of whether comics are literature as a straightforward question about the extension of our term ‘literature’ (or the concept LITERATURE). Then we are unlikely to get a clear and unambiguous answer. It is eminently plausible that the linguistic practices that underwrite our use of the term do not determine whether some comics fall into its extension. And there is good evidence that there are a number of distinct LITERATURE concepts in play in ordinary discourse. So if we seek to answer this purely descriptive question, then I suspect that there will be no determinate and univocal answer. The best we might be able to say is that some comics fall into the extension of certain concepts of literature (namely LITERATURE₁). But no comics will count as belonging to the category picked out by some other concept (namely LITERATURE₂). And it may be indeterminate whether any comics fall into the category picked out by a third concept (namely LITERATURE₃). I am pessimistic about the chances of providing good justification for saying that one of those concepts is ours and the others are not. If this is right, what should we do? My suggestion is that we should ask ourselves what payoff we might get by categorizing comics as literature. That is, given the availability of a concept of literature that includes some comics and another concept that excludes them, we may ask ourselves whether we have reason to prefer one concept over the other.

Here are two of the main reasons that one might want to categorize comics as literature: (1) if it could be established that some comics count as literature, then this would presumably help establish their status as an art form worth taking seriously (i.e. worth studying,

teaching, etc.); and (2) if we could show that some comics are literature, then we would know how to appreciate them (i.e. evaluate and interpret them).

Neither reason is especially persuasive. Merely establishing that some comics are literature might not be enough to establish their status or worth. There is bad and uninteresting literature after all. More significantly, we may establish the status of comics (and the value of teaching and studying them) by straightforwardly showing that works of great art can be produced in the medium. There is no need to show that they are literature in order to do that. We do not need to show that *Maus* or *Krazy Kat* are works of literature in order to establish that they are worth reading, studying, and taking seriously.

And although it is tempting to reach for such work on literature in order to provide insight into the art form, we need not categorize comics as literature to think that borrowing from literary theory and literary criticism would be appropriate. Levinson suggests that:

If art form C has emerged as a combination of A and B, then we appropriately understand or gauge the A-aspect of a C-work . . . against a background of norms, styles, and concerns, attaching to the preexisting practice of an A.⁷³

This seems right. The poetic aspects of works of concrete poetry are appropriately appreciated in light of the norms and styles that attach to the practice of poetry. The musical elements of musical theatre are appropriately gauged in light of the concerns attaching to the practice of music. And, if the arguments above are correct, we appropriately appreciate the literary aspects of a comic book (when they are present) in light of the norms and styles and concerns that attach to literature. Note that this does not imply that an appreciator of a hybrid must have *prior* knowledge of the norms that govern ancestral art forms—it might be the case that knowledge of those norms is provided by means of engagement with the hybrid.

So the aforementioned reasons do not, in fact, provide a basis for thinking that the question of whether comics are literature makes much difference. We have little reason to choose LITERATURE₁ over LITERATURE₂ or LITERATURE₃ if the classification of comics is all that is at issue. There may be other considerations that bear on the issue (e.g. the effect that categorizing comics as literature would have on the philosophy and theory of literature), but I am sceptical of whether those considerations will ultimately tell one way or the other. This is fine. We know that comics are a hybrid—descended from the art form of literature. That tells us everything we need to know.⁷⁴

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73 Levinson, 'Hybrid Art Forms', p. 28.

74 Material that ended up in this paper was presented at Texas Tech University, The Art of Performance conference at Kansas State University, the Leeds Philosophy Work-in-Progress seminar series, the Ilkley Café Humanite, and the Popular Cultures Research Network lecture series. Earlier versions of this very paper were presented at the Philosophy and Literature/Literature and Philosophy Conference at the University of Sussex and at Aesthetics Anarchy 2 at Indiana University, Bloomington. Thanks to audiences at all those events for helpful feedback. I am especially grateful to Mikel Burley, Stephen Davies, Jonathan Friday, Stacie Friend, Wolfgang Huemer, Matthew Kieran, Andrew McGonigal, Stephen Meskin, Henry Pratt, Jonathan Weinberg, and an anonymous referee for this journal for their helpful comments.