

REVIEW

'Should we not also speak of Art as Magic?': A Review of *Alan Moore and the Gothic Tradition*

Alan Moore and the Gothic Tradition, Matthew J. A. Green (ed.), Manchester University Press, Hardcover, B&W, 21.8 x 14.4 x 3 cm, 288 pages, 2013, ISBN-13: 9780719085994

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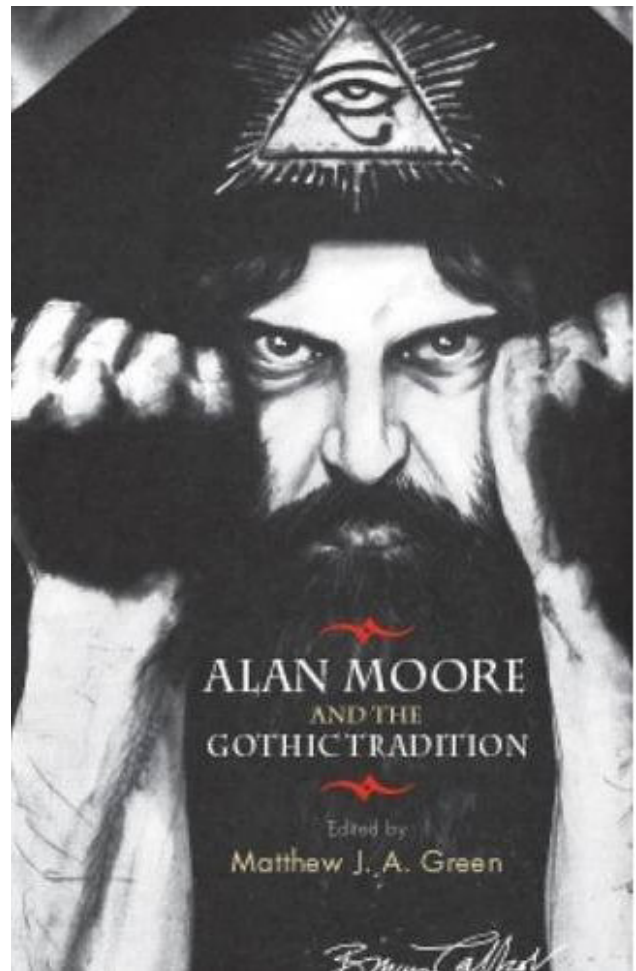
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Reading Alan Moore's works in relation to the Gothic tradition is like looking into the abyss: it is an overwhelming, profound, unsettling experience. *Alan Moore and the Gothic Tradition* is a collection that delves into the dark corners of the author's works and offers 14 reflections that benefit the field of Gothic, comics and post-structuralist studies altogether. Each of the book's four parts – which respectively covers the themes of politics, tropes, inheritance and occult – goes one step further down into Moore's realm, where self-reflexivity and iconoclast attempts to perturb generic conventions become the norm.

The collection appears as original given its focus on the rewriting process of the Gothic that Moore seemed to manifest – sometimes more ostensibly than others – throughout his oeuvre. Indeed, it deals with monsters; yes, madness and magic run through. And yet it offers an insightful reflection on all the things that the Gothic can be instead of what it used to be.

A fair warning though: it is strongly recommended to have an extensive knowledge of Alan Moore's oeuvre to fully appreciate the demanding reflections conveyed here. Some of his less famous works that I had not read presented at first sight a real obstacle to a clear comprehension. On the other hand, the somehow arduous aspect of the collection made me want to go deeper into Moore's labyrinthine work.

'Alan Moore and the Gothic tradition' by editor Matthew J. A. Green is a dense and somewhat complex opening for this collection, especially if you are not familiar with the serpentine literary tradition of the Gothic. The very last paragraph fortunately brings an essential definition of the genre "as manifesting an uncanny temporal disjunction that disrupts mundane experience to expose the innermost vulnerabilities of the self (the abject)" (Green 2013:



16). This overview of the collection brings forth the intriguing idea that Moore uses words as if they were magic, thus falling within the framework of a 'darker undercurrent of the literary tradition' (Botting 1996: 15).

Although the notion of 'politics' is briefly broached here, it is really in "‘Soap opera of the paranormal’: surreal Englishness and post imperial Gothic in *The Bojeffries Saga*" that the vision of Moore as a politically engaged author

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surfaces. In his analysis, Tony Venezia provides a reflection on the English cultural identity crisis of the 1980s and Moore's use of Gothic tropes to tackle societal issues.

'A Gothic politics': Alan Moore's *Swamp Thing* and radical ecology' closes this part with a strong and elaborated reflection on Moore's eco-sensibility. Maggie Gray argues that this 1980s' horror comics mixed Gothic abject and its dimension of 'unrepresentability' with Brechtian alienating effect so as to make readers aware of the urgency of the global ecology situation. Moreover, Gray's analysis reveals how Moore and illustrators Stephen Bissette and John Totleben used the form of the comics itself to echo both the 'excessively ornate rhetorical gestures' (Ellis 2000: 8) of the Gothic as well as an activist discourse on ecology. In one of the strongest articles of this collection, Gray's investigation shows an excellent awareness of the relationship between comics and the Gothic tradition where both genres try to exceed their norms, conventions, and situation within the cultural canon.

This first part provides the reader with compelling views on politics not only seen as a Gothic subtext, but notably as a 'Moorian' trope: the author places himself within the Gothic genre while modifying its aim to reinforce his political agenda and his writing's propensity to tackle societal issues.

The crucial trope that is the *doppelgänger* gives Jochen Ecke the opportunity to examine the impact of Moore's self-reflexive narratives in "'Is that you, our Jack?": an anatomy of Alan Moore's doubling strategies'. Drawing his reflection from Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1871), Ecke argues that Moore challenges the use of the trope in the German Romanticism – where the double serves as an autoscopic device for a character in search for identity – and the "tool for the subversion of generic conventions and their conservative ideological implications" (Ecke 2013: 69) that one can find in the British Gothic. Ecke's analysis of *Swamp Thing* (1984–1987) and *From Hell* (1989–1996) thus shows that Moore uses Gothic tropes in a fruitful restorative way; that is to say as a disruptive creative process rather than a reminiscent one.

This can also be seen in Christian W. Schneider's "'Nothing ever ends": facing the apocalypse in *Watchmen*'. Schneider argues that here the disruptive and thus Gothic aspect comes from the fact that it is a 'diametric opposite' (Klock 2002: 74) of the conventions and form of superhero comics. However, the main interest of this article lies in Schneider demonstrating that the Gothic emerges from the tension between the bleak ineluctability of the passing of time, and the more optimistic and 'Moorian' notion that hope resides in both individual and global responsibilities. Schneider perfectly conveys how Moore and Gibbons refashioned Gothic tropes as to disrupt a genre that relies (sometimes too much) on established conventions.

In 'Gothic liminality in *V for Vendetta*' Markus Oppolzer points to a similar treatment of the figure of the superhero as the lines between hero and villain are blurred. Here, Oppolzer argues that V becomes a Gothic character because both the superhero and the Gothic genres 'focus on traumatised characters who are forced – or

choose – to act outside the [society's] law' (Oppolzer 2013: 103). Drawing from David Punter's view of the law as 'an abstract ideal or system that rigorously shuts out the particular, the doubtful, the abject, or, simply, "the other"' (Punter 1998: 2–3), Oppolzer reasserts Moore's political discourse with his depiction of V as a character who has been broken by the institution and has been left without social identity.

In exploring the literary aspect of the Gothic tradition, the rather diverse topics of these articles once again demonstrate that Moore appropriated some tropes so as to challenge what readers know about this tradition and the comics form, as well as making them question their political views.

The third part argues in favour of Moore as heir of the Gothic tradition and examines how the author inherits, adapts and ultimately revamps the genre.

"Madness and the city": the collapse of reason and sanity in Alan Moore's *From Hell* and 'Radical coterie and the idea of sole survival in *St Leon*, *Frankenstein* and *Watchmen*' both deal with the idea of 'inheritance'; along with 'adaptation', they give a new dimension to the aforementioned concept of 'appropriation'.

Indeed, 'Madness and city' is a complex article in which Monica Germanà suggests that the Gothic aspect of *From Hell* comes from London itself, a city that embraces its occult psychogeography and becomes the epitome of the turn of the century's anxiety and madness. Germanà's article, more than any in this collection, is a rigorous analysis of how Moore inherited and appropriated the Gothic trope of the reason/madness opposition, and used London to catalyse it through his graphic novel.

As for 'Radical coterie', it proposes to see how Moore inherited a specific part of the Gothic that 'had its first flourishing as a result of the optimistic, egalitarian philosophical theories of the 1790s' (Sheridan 2013: 179) and conveyed it in *Watchmen* (1986–1987). Looking at William Godwin's *St Leon* (1799) and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Claire Sheridan offers a compelling view of the *Watchmen* seen as a hopeful and rather positive social group in which the flaws of some are counterbalanced by the strengths of others. In considering the group as a sort of anarchist alternative to an established government, Sheridan once again asserts Moore's emphasis on political discourses via an original and certainly less known Gothic current.

"The sleep of reason": *Swamp Thing* and the intertextual reader' and "'I fashioned a prison that you could not leave": the Gothic imperative in *The Castle of Otranto* and "For the Man Who Has Everything"' focus on concerns of transtextuality – one of the main theoretical frameworks of adaptation studies as well as an intrinsic practice of the Gothic tradition.

Michael Bradshaw's 'The sleep of reason' suggests that Moore attempts to 'fashion and nurture a politicised reader who will be worthy of the meanings of his text' (Bradshaw 2013: 121). It exposes how Moore uses intertextual relationships with other works, genres, and media to convey his political and self-reflexive messages.

In 'I fashioned a prison', Brad Rica investigates Superman's psyche and fortress of solitude. He suggests that a parallel exists between *Otranto* (1764) and 'For The Man Who Has Everything' (1985); not really in the narrative structure but more in their approach of Gothic codes, imagery and figures. In adapting the Gothic conventions to disrupt those of comics', Moore deconstructs the generic conventions Superman carries and diffuses throughout the comics' genre.

'Reincarnating Mina Murray: subverting the Gothic heroine?' is unfortunately an unexciting conclusion to this part, and arguably the weakest article of the collection. Stating the obvious, Laura Hilton suggests that out of the several occurrences of Mina Murray in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), Moore's *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (1999-present), and Stephen Norrington's 2003 film *LXG*, the latest one is an unsatisfactory attempt to re-incarnate and update the character and the Gothic heroine in a contemporary context. Although she makes a very fair point in suggesting connections between adaptation, Gothic, and comics as lesser art forms, Hilton regrettably doesn't develop this reflection further.

Reaching the last part means getting closer to the occult dimension of Moore's work through his self-proclaimed status as a 'magician'. "These are not our promised resurrections": unearthing the uncanny in Alan Moore's *A Small Killing*, *From Hell* and *A Disease of Language* focuses on fairly less known works – including two plays later turned into comics. Christopher Murray shows how Moore blends Art and magic together to access his 'idea space', this hypothetical mental area where every location in the world is loaded with universal concepts. Here, psychogeography and Gothic are linked to explore how Moore resurrect the past to make characters – and readers – embrace the uncanny and, hopefully, go over fear and anxieties through self-reflexivity.

Also an examination of the psychogeography, 'Medium, spirits and embodiment in *Voice of the Fire*' by Julia Round results in an analysis of how the Gothic tropes manifests themselves through both landscapes and the words that describes them. In the only analysis of a non-comics work, Round notably produces a post-Saussurian reflection that highlights the novel as a model of both synchronic and diachronic writing, wherein knowing the past – whatever object it might be – is not necessary but can help to understand the meaning of present and future.

Concluding with an obvious yet essential illustration of the relationship between Moore, Lovecraft and the Gothic, Green's 'A darker magic: heterocosms and bricolage in Moore's recent reworkings of Lovecraft' investigates the recent *Neonomicon*. It results in an examination of Moore's accentuation of Gothic tropes – fear of the past and excessive knowledge – through psychogeography. The *Neonomicon* (2010–2011), Lovecraft's texts, and the Gothic tradition are seen as possibly dangerous 'heterocosms', as intertextual bricolage that make 'other

worlds': but 'the fact that a particular world can be imagined, does not necessarily mean that it should be brought into being' (Green 2013: 272).

What a shame that this collection was not written slightly later! It would have been fantastic to have insightful comments on *Fashion Beast* (2013), Moore's latest and very Gothic work. Nevertheless, *Alan Moore and the Gothic Tradition* is indubitably a thought-provoking collection. One might not agree with some of the readings offered here, as the Gothic seemed to be seen in each and every word of Moore's works. Nevertheless, each article provides an insightful reflection on aspects of the oeuvre that are heavily debated: indeed Alan Moore appropriated and revamped the Gothic; but as for everything in his production it goes through a dialectic of deconstruction-reconstruction that can be seen as Gothic as much as post-modern for instance. In the end, this collection is a strong addition to the 'Alan Moore studies', especially if, like me, one enjoys the radical and somewhat outrageous aspect of Moore's art, messages, and personality.

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