

Moore on Jerusalem, Eternalism, Anarchy and Herbie!

Raphael Sasaki

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Raphael Sasaki: How did you come up with the idea of *Jerusalem*, which tells a story that spreads through 1000 years in Northampton? How was the writing of it?

Alan Moore: Rather than originating from a single idea, *Jerusalem* is more the convergence of several different impulses and concepts. Foremost amongst these were the growing need to talk about the tiny but historically peculiar district I was raised in, and the simultaneous urge to talk about my family in a way that included both its history and its mythology. This, I soon realised, would require the proposed book to possess an unusually wide register that could encompass often-brutal social realism on the one hand and fantastical experimentalism on the other. In addition to such technical considerations, it occurred to me that the work's actual scope and substance needed to be radically extended if I was to talk about my family or their environment in a way that was meaningful: I could not talk about that neighbourhood and its inhabitants without discussing poverty, which would demand a similar investigation into wealth, and social history, and economics. I could not mention that materially disadvantaged population without also speaking of their spiritual imaginings and yearnings, which, as it turned out, necessitated an account of the town's religious development that reached from a pilgrim monk in the 9th century, through John Wycliffe's radical translation of the bible into English and the subsequent upheaval in both visionary writings and incendiary politics, to the English Civil War and the reforms of Phillip Doddridge that came after. Having raised the issue of a visionary literary tradition I next felt obliged to follow that thread from John Wycliffe to John Bunyan (and his fellow hymn-composers Phillip Doddridge and John Newton) through to William Blake, John Clare and, via the medium of Clare's non-contemporary asylum-mate Lucia Joyce, her father James Joyce and her unrequited love, the author Samuel Beckett. Blake, a powerful offstage presence throughout the whole novel from its title onwards, prompted an appraisal of Blake's major influence, Northampton pastor and originator of the Gothic movement in the arts, James Hervey. John Clare and Lucia Joyce, along with Blake himself and members of my family, seemed to imply that madness was a topic that would need addressing. And of course no picture of a neighbourhood could be complete unless the immigrant experience, specifically the black experience, is dealt with, which in turn demands paying attention to the slave trade and its many consequences. The above is by no means a full, inclusive list of everything that went into the making of *Jerusalem*,

but I trust it will at least provide an explanation – what with each new subject raising whole sets of subsidiary subjects to be dealt with – as to why the book needed to be so long.

Jerusalem deals with the idea of eternalism: everything that has happened is happening right now and forever. Could you explain your views on this?

My conception of an eternity that was immediate and present in every instant – a view which I have since learned is known as ‘Eternalism’ – was once more derived from many sources, but a working definition of the idea should most probably begin with Albert Einstein. Einstein stated that we exist in a universe that has at least four spatial dimensions, three of which are the height, depth and breadth of things as we ordinarily perceive them, and the fourth of which, while also a spatial dimension, is perceived by a human observer as the passage of time. The fact that this fourth dimension cannot be meaningfully disentangled from the other three is what leads Einstein to refer to our continuum as ‘spacetime’. This leads logically to the notion of what is called a ‘block universe’, an immense hyper-dimensional solid in which every moment that has ever existed or will ever exist, from the beginning to the end of our universe, is coterminous; a vast snow-globe of being in which nothing moves and nothing changes, forever. Sentient life such as ourselves, embedded in the amber of spacetime, would have to be construed by such a worldview as massively convoluted filaments of perhaps seventy or eighty years in length, winding through this glassy and motionless enormity with a few molecules of slippery and wet genetic material at one end and a handful or so of cremated ashes at the other. It is only the bright bead of our consciousness moving inexorably along the thread of our existence, helplessly from past to future, that provides the mirage of movement and change and transience. A good analogy would be the strip of film comprising an old fashioned movie-reel: the strip of film itself is an unchanging and motionless medium, with its opening scenes and its finale present in the same physical object. Only when the beam of a projector – or in this analogy the light of human consciousness – is passed across the strip of film do we see Charlie Chaplin do his funny walk, and save the girl, and foil the villain. Only then do we perceive events, and continuity, and narrative, and character, and meaning, and morality. And when the film is concluded, of course, it can be watched again. Similarly, I suspect that when our individual four-dimensional threads of existence eventually reach their far end with our physical demise, there is nowhere for our travelling bead of consciousness to go save back to the beginning, with the same thoughts, words and deeds recurring and reiterated endlessly, always seeming like the first time this has happened except, possibly, for those brief, haunting spells of déjà vu. Of course, another good analogy, perhaps more pertinent to Jerusalem itself, would be that of a novel. While it’s being read there is the sense of passing time and characters at many stages of their lives, yet when the book is closed it is a solid block in which events that may be centuries apart in terms of narrative are pressed together with just millimetres separating them, distances no greater than the thickness of a page. As to why I decided to unpack this scientific vision of eternity in a deprived slum neighbourhood, it occurred to me that through this reading of human existence, every place, no matter how mean, is transformed to the eternal, heavenly city. Hence the title.

You have interesting ideas about the relationship between magic and works of art. What’s the role of the artist-magician in our society? How do you practice magic?

In my understanding of magic, it is inextricably bound up with the development of modern consciousness some 70,000 years ago during the cognitive revolution. This leap in human aware-

ness is traditionally believed to be dependent on our developing use of language. Since language is itself based upon the principle of representation – of this mark or this sound representing that object or animal – then we have the essential basis of art preceding language, which itself precedes consciousness. The relatively sudden advent of that consciousness with all of its attendant unfamiliar phenomena would, I suggest, leave early humans with no other recourse that to regard the sum total of this new inner life, this new experience, as magic. This enables us to identify magic as a phenomenon inextricably bound up with language, art and consciousness as if they were indeed but facets of the same thing, and to provide a new definition of magic as “Any purposeful engagement with the phenomena and possibilities of consciousness.” This construction is deliberately broad, in order to include all of those areas that I believe to be part of magic’s original remit, which is to say science, medicine, astronomy, the visual and literary arts, performance, music, mathematics, access to an inner world, political advice passed from the shaman or shamanka to the tribal chieftain, and the pursuit of a vital and integrating shared ecstasy. All of these things and many more appear to have their origins in shamanism, its performance and its practice as an all-inclusive one-stop model of existence. It’s my thesis that across the centuries, commencing with our earliest urban settlements, magic has had its various parts and functions hived off or else subcontracted out to artists, writers, musicians, priests, and viziers. With the Renaissance and the rise of science and medicine from pre-existing alchemy and folk-healing traditions, magic lost two of its remaining applications, and then with Freud’s advent of psychoanalysis around the early 20th century even magic’s access to the inner world was compromised. In short, I see almost the entirety of the modern culture surrounding us as being the dismembered body of magic. This seems to me to be in accordance with the alchemical formula of *solvé et coagula* where *solvé* represents reductionism – taking a thing apart into its components to see how it works, or the process of analysis – while *coagula* represents holism, or putting the disassembled parts back together in a hopefully improved or at least better-understood form, which is the process of synthesis. Simply put, I see task and indeed the responsibility of modern magicians/artists to be the reassembly of the fractured world, the fractured worldviews and the fractured psychologies that presently surround us. As for how I practice magic, while there may still be the occasional ceremonial ritual if required, at this stage of my development I practice magic by being aware of the magical dimension of everything I do. In fact, I’m doing it right now.

What’s the difference in the processes of writing novels and writing comics?

The most obvious difference is that in a prose novel, you neither have nor should require an illustrator. What this means is that all of those lengthy paragraphs of scene and character description, which would previously have been seen by only the book’s artist, must now be brushed up considerably from their original stark functionality and embedded smoothly in the narrative itself. This in turn changes a lot of things. For instance, in a comic book you have the power to misdirect or to subliminally inform your reader by burying a salient visual detail in the background of a panel, whereas prose lacks that capacity and will demand new strategies to accomplish those things. On the other hand, with prose there are perhaps even greater opportunities for misdirection or subliminal manipulation in that by choosing what to mention or describe you effectively limit your audience’s ability to see what is going on, nudging the reader into false assumptions that can be satisfyingly exposed and resolved at the point of the author’s choosing. Also, in prose you can make what is unseen as important as what is visible. The author H.P. Lovecraft’s tales exploit this by heightening the reader’s unease with entities that are al-

most impossible to describe or visualise, whereas in comic strip adaptations of Lovecraft, unless ingenious evasions are made, we have what was meant to be indescribable pinned down to one concrete, visible and thus eminently describable form. Both media have their differing abilities, but if I had to choose which one was the more elegant I'd have to come down on the side of prose, whereby with a couple of dozen characters and a peppering of punctuation marks, it is possible to delineate the whole of our conceptual universe in its entirety.

Before your first well read stories you published fanzines, worked cleaning toilets and in tannery, sold LSD and had a job a office for a subcontractor of a gas board. Do you miss being young and anonymous? How were those times?

While I greatly enjoyed being young, with all the energy and physical capability that youth implies, I am also greatly enjoying being old and having access to all of the different energies, and to all of the emotional and intellectual capability that age implies. As for anonymity, that's perhaps a more difficult question to answer honestly. Yes, sometimes I do find myself wishing that I could just go about my business in Northampton without attracting so much attention, but on the other hand that attention, here in my home town, is generally well-intentioned, low key, respectful, and seems as uncomfortable with the idea of celebrity as am I myself. Celebrity on a larger scale is something that I don't want anything to do with, and nine times out of ten can successfully ignore or refuse to engage with. Of course, my only reason for pursuing the work that I do is the hope that my work, and therefore my ideas, can reach and affect as wide an audience as is humanly possible. Logically, I have to accept that this also means that my name and my reputation will be reaching a similarly-sized audience, and that there is a certain contradiction in wanting one of these outcomes without being prepared to accept the other. Thus the best course of action seems to be to try to minimise the impact of my personal celebrity as much as possible – for my own good, and for the good of everyone involved – while making the most of the potential audience to which this celebrity grants me access. Most of the time, I feel I do a pretty decent job of handling this, but that is probably a matter that other people can judge more accurately than I can.

What have led you to create *V for Vendetta*? What were the influences and ideas passing in your mind at that time?

I'm afraid that for a few years now, I have felt that since I am apparently not allowed to own the work that I created in the same manner that an author in a more grown-up and worthwhile field might expect to do, and since my protests at having my work stolen from me are interpreted by a surely young-at-heart and non-unionised audience as evidence of my "grouchiness" and "cantankerousness", then the only active position that is left to me is to disown the works in question. I no longer own copies of these books and, other than the earnest creative work that I put into them at the time, my only associations with these works are broken friendships, perfectly ordinary corporate betrayals and wasted effort. Given that I will certainly never be reading any of these works again and that I have no wish to see them or even to think of them, it follows that I don't wish to discuss them, sign copies of them or, indeed, have anything to do with them. As I would hope should be obvious, to separate emotionally from work that you were previously very proud of is quite a painful experience and is not undertaken lightly. However, having to answer questions about my opinions regarding DC Comics latest imbecilic use of my characters

or stories would be much more harrowing. And, of course, it's not as if I don't have plenty of current work to be getting on with.

What was the impact of popular heroes comic books in our culture? Why are people fascinated by alternative realities?

I think the impact of superheroes on popular culture is both tremendously embarrassing and not a little worrying. While these characters were originally perfectly suited to stimulating the imaginations of their twelve or thirteen year-old audience, today's franchised übermenschen, aimed at a supposedly adult audience, seem to be serving some kind of different function, and fulfilling different needs. Primarily, mass-market superhero movies seem to be abetting an audience who do not wish to relinquish their grip on (a) their relatively reassuring childhoods, or (b) the relatively reassuring 20th century. The continuing popularity of these movies to me suggests some kind of deliberate, self-imposed state of emotional arrest, combined with a numbing condition of cultural stasis that can be witnessed in comics, movies, popular music and, indeed, right across the cultural spectrum. The superheroes themselves – largely written and drawn by creators who have never stood up for their own rights against the companies that employ them, much less the rights of a Jack Kirby or Jerry Siegel or Joe Schuster – would seem to be largely employed as cowardice compensators, perhaps a bit like the handgun on the nightstand. I would also remark that save for a smattering of non-white characters (and non-white creators) these books and these iconic characters are still very much white supremacist dreams of the master race. In fact, I think that a good argument can be made for D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* as the first American superhero movie, and the point of origin for all those capes and masks.

You have deconstructed an entire genre and exerted major influence in the adult comic books after the publication of *Watchmen*. How do you see it's lasting impact on comics?

Again, see my answer to question six. Frankly, I don't think about comics that much, I don't think of *Watchmen* at all, and the lasting impact of one upon the other is really no longer my concern.

You have been in and out of the comic big publishers all your life. How do you feel about the industry at this point?

I'd imagine that after these last three questions, my feelings (such as they are) about the comics industry at this point would be fairly obvious. Other than finishing my commitments to those publishers such as Knockabout, Avatar and Top Shelf who have always treated me well, I don't want anything to do with the comic industry in future. I still respect and love the comic medium and may very well work in the medium at some future point, but I genuinely want to put my connections with a comic industry that appears to me to be hopelessly dysfunctional far, far behind me.

Could you tell a very strange thing that happened to you?

Well, my younger brother once choked on a cough-sweet and went without breathing for between five and ten minutes with no obvious ill effects, but that's something that I unpack more fully in Jerusalem. Other than that, I remember swimming in one of the deep-gouged and diamond-clear streams of Glen Nevis, back in the early 1970s. Electing to climb out of the stream

up a twelve-foot rock-face, halfway up I discovered a jutting stone ledge, only a few inches across, upon which was resting a small pile of hair-clippings, the hair being fine, blonde and definitely human. It looked like it might have been that of a child. That was a thing which, for want of any likely or even conceivable explanation, I categorised as strange. Eerie, even.

What's anarchy for you? What are your political beliefs?

Anarchy, meaning simply 'no leaders', to me implies a situation in which everyone must take responsibility for their own actions and, therefore, serve as their own leaders. In such a state, inter-individual cooperation is the most successful and thus the default form of interaction. This is why our species, for the hundreds of thousands of years that constituted its hunter/gatherer stage, was non-hierarchical, and why the greatest social sin in those earliest proto-societies was the attempt to claim greater status than anyone else, this being punishable by ridicule and, when ridicule proved insufficient, by banishment. This is apparently still the tradition amongst some of world's aboriginal people up to the present day. It is currently thought that those earliest communities somehow realised that status would create divisions that would ultimately destabilise the entire culture. For me, anarchy suggests that to become fully realised as human beings we must each make our own individual peace with the universe and stand as women or men, naked and denuded of status, at the heart of a stupefying and starry existence which surely makes all such status less than meaningless. Anarchy was the political position that Charles Darwin came to believe the most rational and humane, and as defined above is a pretty exact representation of my own political beliefs.

What are your favourite ever comic books/strips?

There is an endless amount of wonderful material in the comic medium, but if I had to boil it down to single comic strip work for which I retain the most affection, it would have to be Richard E. Hughes and Ogden Whitney's sublime *Herbie*, originally published by the American Comic Group (ACG) during the 1960s. This is not, of course, to diminish the medium's many other great accomplishments, from Lynd Ward and Winsor McCay to Harvey Kurtzman and Will Eisner to Garth Ennis and Kieron Gillen, but simply to say that for pure comic book delight that never seems to age, my money is on *Herbie*. Who appears both in the narrative and on the cover of *Jerusalem*.

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