

## **The Anti-Pastoral Novelty Library: Bucolic Superhero Satire in the Paratexts of Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan***

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A basic strategy of contemporary comics studies is to defend it as a unique form of modern art and culture in the face of cultural stereotypes that suggest that it is merely "kids' stuff." This argument is valuable and important, but it can actually work at odds with another, equally effective way of establishing its aesthetic legitimacy: namely, to connect graphic literature, using familiar critical-historical means, to various longstanding aesthetic traditions. In this vein, I can agree with only the first half of Thierry Groensteen's call for the legitimization of comics: "Comic art is an autonomous and original medium. The only thing it has in common with literature are: that it is printed and sold in bookshops, and that it contains linguistic statements" ("Why" 10). It does not necessarily follow that an autonomous and original medium shares nothing, on the aesthetic level, with other media.<sup>1</sup> Poetry, fiction, and drama are likewise original and autonomous forms, but all are considered part of literature. Character, narrative, plot, style, motif, exposition, foreshadowing... these are just the beginning of a long list of familiar literary terms that are variously encountered on every page of comics. In fact, at its most fundamental level, since at its base it is a synergy of words and images, graphic literature can and does draw on the vast historical archives of the various literary and visual arts, much of which has been diligently studied by many comics creators.

One of those traditions whose connection to comics I will be exploring in this essay is pastoral, an aesthetic mode which itself plays out in the literary, visual, and even musical arts. At heart, pastoral (epitomized in the figure of the shepherd-poet) involves literary attentiveness to rural existence, especially as represented in the basic sociocultural opposition between the country and the city (R. Williams). Dating from the classical era, pastoral has been subsequently distributed among various literary forms, such as drama and fiction. Many modern and contemporary authors, including such influential figures as Robert Frost and Seamus Heaney, have also continued to evoke pastoral in its traditional form, in poetry. A key facet

**WORKS AND DAYS 63/64, Vol. 32, Nos. 1&2, 2014-15**

of the perdurability of “the pastoral”—which some critics have called a “mode” like tragedy and romance, rather than a genre, to emphasize its recognizability throughout literary history (e.g., Loughrey)—is that it can avidly adopt a skeptical attitude towards its own starry-eyed idealism. The two great Western origin stories of pastoral, the pagan Golden Age and the Judeo-Christian Garden of Eden, both encapsulate the idea that we can only decline or fall from our primitive best, our lost pastoral beginnings. “Nothing gold can stay,” as Frost puts it in the poem of that title; when we grow up, as Dylan Thomas says in “Fern Hill,” we must “wake to the farm forever fled from the childless land.” But the sincerity, and even the value, of such pastoral nostalgia itself can be put into question in the pastoral tradition. This counter-tradition has been called “anti-pastoral” (Gifford 116-45), and can be traced to two of the earliest and most important classical practitioners of pastoral poetry, namely Theocritus in Greek, and Vergil in Latin. Was there ever really such a perfect time and place? And why would such a bucolic Erewhon need to exist anyway, except perhaps for some sinister ideological reason? One of the unique aspects of the pastoral mode, then, is that it contains and even welcomes this anti-pastoral dimension as a central part of its own modal self-awareness.

### *Jimmy Corrigan as Anti-Pastoral*

To show one way in which contemporary comics can be connected to storied literary forms, I will explore in this essay how one particularly well-regarded graphic novel, Chris Ware’s *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (2000), can be linked to pastoral literature, particularly to the anti-pastoral tradition. One of the most ambitious and self-conscious creators of comics working today, Chris Ware has rightfully been called an “auteur” since, like many great authors and filmmakers, he not only exerts great creativity and craft in the pursuit of aesthetic success, but his achievements have also been authorized by the broader critical establishment (Thurtle and Mitchell 270n4). Ware has been the subject of a scholarly monograph (Raeburn) as well as a volume of critical essays (Ball and Kuhlman), and he is the lead figure to be considered under the section “Individual Creators” in the MLA’s canon-making volume on *Teaching the Graphic Novel* (Tabachnik). Among Ware’s works, *Jimmy Corrigan* has been baptized by Peter Schjeldahl as “the first formal masterpiece of a medium [i.e., the graphic novel] that has proved to be unexpectedly complex and fertile,”<sup>2</sup> and has been examined in a number of critical articles (Baker; Bredehoft; Brogan; Gilmore; Groensteen, “Jimmy Corrigan”; P. Williams). One of the many reasons why *Jimmy Corrigan* has received such serious attention is the way in which it both rereads and consciously distances itself from the superhero genre of comic books, which have often been perceived as the most intellectually lightweight brand of comics. Like Ware’s other man-child creation Rusty Brown, the anti-social memorabilia collector, Jimmy is in many ways the ultimate anti-superhero. Rusty Brown and Jimmy Corrigan both riff on the arrested development of the stereotypically boyish comic book fan,

playing cleverly into the old argument, most memorably formulated by Frederic Wertham, that comic books are both juvenile and juvenilizing—bad for you, and bad for your developing mind.

The same “juvenile” contention can and has been made about pastoral: it is just too simple and “soft,” and does not relate to the “hard” realities of life and work. Historically, moreover, pastoral has often been associated with an author’s juvenilia and other early work: Alexander Pope, for instance, was happy to claim that he had authored his seasonal pastoral poems when he was just sixteen years old.<sup>3</sup> When Chris Ware’s Jimmy Corrigan (the contemporary protagonist and the other main character, his grandfather) imagine pleasant times and places, they are almost always associated with nice weather or an idyllic childhood past, or both—but these bucolic moments are few and far between, and often cruelly truncated or compromised. For instance, the bucolic snow day spent by Jimmy’s grandfather in the workshop of an acquaintance’s toy-maker father is ended by a beating from his own father, and followed up on a subsequent day by the failed casting of a little leaden horse, which Jimmy had hoped to gift to his crush, the otherwise nameless, red-haired “McGinty girl”—the horse being another motif woven into the anti-pastoral of *Jimmy Corrigan*. Unfortunately, this leaden horse turns out looking more like a turd, and Jimmy the great grandfather’s romantic hopes are crushed. Yet he still retrieves the leaden lump from the snow bank where he has thrown it—and it remains one of the few concrete reminders of youthful happiness.

In this way, various bucolic themes and symbols, such as the horse and the peach and the bird, are consistently employed by Ware in an anti-pastoral counterpoint. Take, as another typical instance of compromised pastoral, a neighbor’s fragrant gift of peaches on a warm summer’s day to Jimmy’s great grandfather—but the occasion is that he has been seriously injured on the job and has lost his income, and with his mother (Jimmy’s grandmother) on her death bed. Shortly thereafter, Jimmy takes advantage of the lack of oversight and eats some sugar in the kitchen, which he discovers, too late, is infested with insects. Imagining the cookies he had previously eaten made with that sugar, he rushes outside to vomit. Seated on the ground, listening to the sound of locusts—and we can note that singing insects, including cicadas, crickets, and locusts, have been a common pastoral motif since the ancient era—Jimmy enjoys a short reverie about talking in the schoolyard to the McGinty girl, who suggests a summer visit to her grandmother’s, where, she says, they might swim and ride her horse. She is far from sincere, of course, and any happiness that this reverie does impart is interrupted by the exit of the visitor who brought the peaches, and who tries to sympathize with Jimmy about his dying grandmother. Again and again, such badly spoiled pastoral moments underscore how all is not well with these urban characters, who dwell in a Chicago (both the city of the past and the present), and alternately a suburban Waukosh, Michigan, that are far indeed from being bucolic paradises.<sup>4</sup> Both Jimmy Corrigan are nearly helpless, and they never find rescue from any superhero, despite any of their pastoral fantasies to the contrary.

*Jimmy Corrigan* is also quintessentially a novel of the city, dominated as it is by the history of the Second City and its iconic skyline. This urban setting actually augments a basic pastoral dynamic: like many pastoral works, *Jimmy Corrigan* also invokes the rhythm of escape or retreat from the city, along with the compensatory return with new knowledge (though in this case the lesson is primarily for us readers rather than for our protagonist, who remains ignorant that he is genetically linked to his father's adopted black daughter). Terry Gifford describes this unique dynamic of the genre: "This is the essential paradox of the pastoral: that a retreat to a place apparently without the anxieties of the town, or the court, or the present, actually delivers insights into the culture from which it originates" (Gifford 82). Using all the nonlinear possibilities of postmodern literature, Ware initiates retreat from the city on a multitude of levels: there is geographical retreat (Jimmy travels to suburban Waukosh, Michigan to meet his estranged father); chronological retreat (moving in and out of the past, going as far back as the Civil War); seasonal (flashbacks to springtime and summer); locational retreat (various Chicago sites that emulate the classic pastoral *locus amoenus*, the "pleasant place," like the World's Fair and times of recreation and fantasy play with the childhood friends of Jimmy's grandfather); and even technological retreat (for a few days at least, thanks in part to his new answering machine, Jimmy is able to avoid the incessant phone calls from his mother). The anti-pastoral catch is that when Jimmy does return to Chicago, it is not he, but we as the readers of his family saga who have learned the most. Moreover, by locating the graphic novel firmly in one geographical region and sliding freely back and forth through time to trace the Corrigan family saga, Ware is neatly able to capture both of two dominant poles of the pastoral tradition: the idyllic pastoral of place (Arcadia, the bucolic retreat of forest and countryside that should soothe and inspire) and the Edenic pastoral of time (the Golden Age, the time of innocent, childlike perfection that should rouse nostalgic memories) (Snyder).

Perhaps the most striking examples of anti-pastoral in *Jimmy Corrigan* are the brief but gripping Civil War scenes, two pages that form a quintessential modernist sequence (P. Williams). On the recto and verso of one page are silhouettes of prone soldiers lying beneath trees that are being shredded by gunfire, with peach blossoms cascading down in the final panel. Notably, the bracketing "woodland scenes featuring a red and white bird," found on the verso of the page preceding and the recto of the page following, "virtually mirror each other, bookending the battle scene and seemingly setting it aside from *Jimmy Corrigan's* narrative with twin moments of quiet pastoral contemplation" (P. Williams).<sup>5</sup> Unexpectedly, as we arrive from the first pastoral moment into what we gradually realize is a Civil War battle, we are thrust into an anti-pastoral scene initially "moist with the scent of settling peach blossoms." Suddenly, "A Party / of freshly breakfasted bookbinders barbers and bottle makers / is blown to pieces. / Only / One unlucky hero will be left to see / by the light of a midnight thunderstorm / the churned up bits of his company / swollen and split in the rain / and fed upon by hogs / freed from the surrounding farms." The intercut tableau of the panels on

the recto, where the pitch black of the night scene and the feeding hogs illuminated only by flashes of lightning, are intercut with panels showing the morning of the battle, collapsing the time sequence and emphasizing how the soldiers' bodies are being gradually dismembered, turned into feed for the escaped pigs. Jimmy's great-grandfather (apparently the "[o]ne unlucky hero") reacts to the carnage by shooting off one of his fingers, far from the heroic lie that he tells his son later about losing it while capturing an enemy soldier. Nevertheless, the image that closes off these jarring panels is the cascade of the peach blossoms, an anti-pastoral vignette that recalls the frequent figurative associations in world literature between the shedding of flowers and the falling of soldiers.<sup>6</sup>

The fact that *Jimmy Corrigan* is deeply ironic and tragic, and unfolds in geographic and imaginary spaces that lie far indeed from the idyllic natural worlds of an Arcadia or an Eden, can also be read as an integral link to the broader pastoral tradition, which has often been marked by serious suspicions about the artificial ideal of the pastoral countryside itself. Since such early modern recastings of the bucolic tropes as Sir Walter Raleigh's corrective poem "The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd" (1600), there has been "a sceptical use of the term—'pastoral' as pejorative, implying that the pastoral vision is too simplified" (Gifford 2). Much satirical anti-pastoral can be found as well in modern and contemporary writing in both the United Kingdom and the United States, all emphasizing the inadequacy of the tradition even as it is being re-extended to new eras of literary history (Gifford 116-45). And, as I will try to demonstrate in the rest of this article, there are further reasons to link *Jimmy Corrigan* closely to the anti-pastoral vision—specifically, in sets of evidence that are unique, respectively, to the collected print volumes, and to Ware's original serial publications. These are the underrated, and sometimes even inaccessible and essentially lost to the critic's view, materials that have been called "paratexts."

### Anti-Pastoral in *Jimmy Corrigan's* (Recovered) Paratexts

In pursuing this anti-pastoral interpretation of *Jimmy Corrigan* as it plays out in Ware's well-recognized anti-superhero theme, I will locate my analysis both in the graphic novel as published in trade book form, as well as in the numbers of Ware's *Acme Novelty Library*, in which it was first serialized. A particularly important site of investigation will be Ware's "paratexts," as Gerard Genette calls them, those textual "thresholds," where anti-pastoral elements seem to become particularly strong. For Genette, the quintessential paratext is the title: technically, a title is not an integral part of the "text" itself, but yet it stands right there next to the text, and is certainly something essential to our sense of what the text "is," how we refer to the text, and what the text means. It has already been observed that the paratexts of the trade collections of *Jimmy Corrigan* are unavoidable, and indispensable, in interpreting the graphic novel (Ball 46). These paratexts include the dust jacket of the hardcover, the cardstock covers of the paperback reprint, and, especially, the punning "Corrigenda" section that retrospectively completes the col-

lected volume. For example, in “Corrigenda” under the entry “peach” is an anti-pastoral cross reference to “symbol,” which reads in part, “something that represents something else, esp. common in bad literature.”<sup>7</sup>

The first entry of the “Corrigenda” is the fascinating paratextual “Apology,” in which Ware is playing with the senses of both “defense” and “regret.” “Apology” describes Ware’s completely unexpected and oddly frustrating meeting with his own estranged father while he was still in the throes of completing the graphic novel. Remarkably, as the “Apology” describes, any desire that either Ware and his protagonist had for deepening their connections to their respective fathers is permanently frustrated by the sudden and unexpected deaths of both—and, uncannily, Ware did not learn of his own father’s death until he had already portrayed the death of Jimmy’s father. Ware is left with the melancholy thought that reading his own text is as close as he might get to knowing his father: “in racing through this story for its final ‘edit,’ skidding past all these errors, omissions, and mistakes, it occurred to me upon closing ‘the manuscript’ that the four or five hours it took to read is almost exactly the total time I ever spent with my father, either in person or on the telephone.” Ware’s self-consciousness about the print-paradigm terms “edit” and “manuscript,” which are not entirely appropriate for the activity of the artist of a graphic novel, underscores his attentiveness to both the thematic as well as the concrete aspects of his project. The “Corrigenda” epitomizes Ware’s assiduous attempts to re-address and reformulate some of these issues from the project’s edges, the paratexts. In addition to exploring the paratexts of the trade volumes, I will underscore that we should also try to recover the paratexts of *The Acme Novelty Library* that were not reprinted in either the trade hardcover or paperback collections.

As a close student of comics history, Chris Ware is intimately aware of the exorbitant paratextual conventions of the superhero comic book and its cover, which is plastered with all kinds of paratextual elements (titles and teasers, creators and publishers, issue dates and numbers, heroes and series badges, logos and marketing, the famous Comics Code Authority stamp, and so on). In taking down the superhero convention, the cover is not to be spared by Ware either, and he plays with all the paratextual possibilities of the cover and its adjuncts. For instance, the cover of the paperback edition of *Jimmy Corrigan* calls the book an “official paperbound apologue”: “an actual size full-color replica of the 2000 A.D. hardback cultural sideroad taken by an otherwise perfectly respectable publisher briefly fleeced into believing *literary picturebooks* might actually score them some fast cash.” Here Ware makes the reader fully alert to the fact that even the paperback reprint and the original hardcover edition are not the same things. A variety of paratextual features of the paperback distinguish it as a unique edition, perhaps most notably the addition of an epilogue, a two-page spread on the last page and inside back cover. Dated 2002, according to a newspaper advertisement pictured in its first frame, the epilogue shows Amy taking a nursing shift on Thanksgiving, implying she has no family with which to celebrate the holiday (at least beyond the elderly patients



she cares for), and yet her life seems to have much of the purpose and meaning that Jimmy's lacks. While hardly a happy ending, the epilogue contrasts subtly with the abortive Thanksgiving dinner Jimmy tries to share with his mother in the cafeteria at her retirement home, and makes for an interesting comparison as well with Ware's iconic series of Thanksgiving paratexts, the four *New Yorker* covers that Ware created in 2006.<sup>8</sup>

Besides supplementing the main narrative of *Jimmy Corrigan* like the paperback's epilogue does, paratexts allow Ware to explore general anxieties about subject and medium, and these authorly moments are often anti-pastoral in tone and content. A prime example of this is the 24-panel comic strip on the back cover of the paperback edition, on the life and rescue of the personified "Copy #58,463" of *Jimmy Corrigan*. This friendly little red volume enters the world with high hopes, and relishes the boat trip to America from the printer in Hong Kong. But, at Barnes Ignoble Superstore, a rude manager insists that Ware's book should not be shelved alongside literary greats like Tolstoy, Updike, and Vonnegut: "Look!... This is a 'graphic novel.' *Graffik nohvel*. It's kid's lit... You know, superhero stuff... for retards! / It goes in the graphic novel section, not in literature...." Even more damningly, the graphic novel section is located in a distant area "somewhere near science fiction and role-playing games."<sup>9</sup> Then, after a year languishing on the shelf, poor copy #58,463 gets thrown away. Fortunately, Chris Ware catches this discarded book listed on a royalty statement, and like a superhero, he "instantly" flies to the dumpster behind the bookstore and saves it, welcoming it into his home and feeding it as if it were a rescued cat. The comic's final frame, surrounding the book's ISBN and barcode, incorporates the price of the book with an appeal of "won't you help?," parodying charity appeals to help a children's cause, and for just pennies a day: "start the caring... Help save a dying, irrelevant art today... Please donate... before it's too late!" Besides decorating the back cover of the paperback, then, the comic strip "Copy #58,463" allows Ware to air a variety of themes that pertain to his oeuvre as well as the work at hand, including the anti-superhero theme—or more precisely, as I will return to again below, the author as the only possible superhero for the work. In other paratextual gestures, there is a cross reference within "Copy #58,463" to the (mostly) positive reviews collected at the beginning of the paperback, as well as two arrows leading to a medallion trumpeting the American Book Award and the Guardian Prize. With an ironic mixture of humility and pride, the medallion says parenthetically that "the consumer will note that these honors are generally only bestowed upon those authors who refuse to learn how to draw."

It should also be underscored that these paperback paratexts of *Jimmy Corrigan* occupy a particularly significant theoretical space in Genette's understanding of the paratext. That is, they are *peritexts* (paratexts that appear right within or alongside) the paperback reprint volume, but in the larger history of the publication of the graphic novel—since they do not appear in the hardcover collection or the *Acme Novelty Library* issues—they also function as *epitexts* ("exterior" paratexts, like reviews, author interviews, etc.). This is part of

*Jimmy Corrigan's* unique transtextuality (Genette's term for all the related varieties of textuality): just as the collected volumes, both the hardcover and the paperback editions, emerge with unique peritexts of their own, so each successive release leaves behind peritexts from the previous publications, ones either altered or not included in the successive editions, which then in turn become epitexts. This ephemerality is completely normative for the paratext, as Genette writes: "a paratextual element may appear at any time, [and] it may also disappear, definitively or not, by authorial decision or outside intervention or the eroding effects of time" (6). The problem for comics studies is that these *Acme* paratexts (once peritexts) have become effectively lost (out-of-print epitexts), since the readers reasonably assume that they hold in their hands "the text" of *Jimmy Corrigan*, with whatever paratexts the author or publisher intends them to have for interpreting that text. "Readers" here of course include the various scholars who have interpreted *Jimmy Corrigan* without a complete accounting of the various layers of paratextuality implicit in the graphic novel's publication history. This is less problematic for the transition from the hardcover to the paperback collected volumes, since both of these are widely available in libraries and as used copies. It is more problematic for the *Acme Novelty Library* issues, which are out of print, not generally accessible in libraries, and of interest mainly to collectors of alternative comics, which by their nature are far less widely available. Moreover, the amount of "lost" paratextual material is quite large, comprising as much as 10% of the issue for some of the *Acme* serial volumes.

In fact, a closer examination of some of the more memorable paratexts within the story demonstrates that attention to the variants of paratext across *Jimmy Corrigan's* publication history can yield many insights into the aesthetic evolution of this text, which was hardly simply re-collected into the reprint volumes. Take for instance one outstanding paratext, the cut-out model of Jimmy's grandfather's house and yard, which comes complete with his grandmother's coffin in a hearse and a set of "imaginary giant grasshoppers." Although this paratext is included in the reprint volumes, it differs in many significant particulars of content and presentation from the original, which appeared in *Acme Novelty Library* no. 13. There, it appeared in two places, as a title page and as a page of end matter; in the reprint volumes, it appears as a single page, recto and verso, both stripped of much of its original text, and it is tucked into the middle of the postmodern hide-and-seek sequence where the children play across both time and space. Lost, then, is at least the fiction that readers could cut out and assemble the little buildings, since printing back and front on the same sheet renders the activity impossible, at least without the suggested "pantographic or electrostatic enlargement" (i.e., photocopying). In addition, besides changing some of instructive diagrams to blue, much of the informative written paratext from *Acme* no. 13 has been deleted, including the explanatory title: "a miniature paper construction offered as an activity to those for whom experience in matters of the flesh is not necessarily a defining personal characteristic." This invokes the stereotype that comic book readers are typically virgins; perhaps this is less appropriate for the



general audience envisioned by the Pantheon editions. And even when nearly identical paratextual passages are included in the reprint edition of the cut-outs, some significant edits have been made as well: where the reprint says that the cut-outs “will *potentially* reward the concerted craftsman with models of relative *usefulness*,” the *Acme* text reads the direct opposite: “will reward the concerted craftsman with models of relative *uselessness*”! (emphasis added).

It should be clear from the above that the close reading of paratexts and their publishing variants holds strong potential for comics generally, and that their examination can yield fundamental insights for Chris Ware in particular, given his strong paratextual obsessions. Here in the paratexts of *Jimmy Corrigan*, Ware’s various themes, including the anti-pastoral, are honed to razor sharpness. In the following sections, I will further this analysis of *Jimmy Corrigan* by examining various covers, front matter, and other one-off comics paratexts from the extensive un-reprinted matter of *The Acme Novelty Library*, and showing how this material often places the primary text of the graphic novel in a particularly anti-pastoral light.

### **“Our Spring Novelty Library” and the Waukosha Postcards (*Acme* No. 12)**

On the inside front cover of *Acme* no. 12, a page titled “Our Spring Novelty Library” (“a fresh addition to any home”), we encounter an elaborate spread of columned newsprint dominated by a colored cutout “mailing box” designed to hold the series of “Novelty Postcard views” of Waukosha, Michigan. This latter page, with its overblown, satirical descriptions on one side and the pictures of paved over, blasé suburbanscapes on the other, appears at the back of *Acme* no. 12, but is inserted, alone, at the beginning of the 32-page sequence in the reprint volumes. In true anti-pastoral fashion, the lead story of “Our Spring Novelty Library” neatly skewers the imagined college-age audience of this alternative comic. Entitled “Trees Leafing Out, Dog Urine Thawing: Many Human Beings Hope to Reproduce, Experts Say,” this bogus feature gently parodies the college custom of spring break, and assumes that college-age *Acme* readers, at least, will not be taking part:

Large numbers of people residing in the principal cities are planning elaborate celebrations for the arrival of the Spring meridian this year, especially those engaged by our academies and training facilities, [...] and so at appointed resort spots this season special salons will be held, sponsored by some of our nation’s most prosperous breweries, and much in the way of healthful congress and ribaldry is expected.

Those who choose to remain behind, however, will be enjoying this twelfth number of the ACME Novelty Library and its many activities and games [...]. Students of the “cartoon language” may [...] savour the many subtle shifts in tone, pattern, and dreariness which this number affords, and bask in the renewal of nature’s beauty while they wonder after the gentle touch of new love, watching

squirrels and birds frolic about upon the moist earth  
below the dormitory window, the wrinkled tissues of our  
quarto crushed between their quaking fingers.

The anti-pastoral tone, where an ideal of bucolic love in springtime is being skewered and deflated, matches perfectly with the two-sidedness of the Waukosha postcards, where the inane rhetoric of civic boosterism can never completely paper over how commonplace and almost desolate the suburban spaces can seem to even the casual viewer. The only other thing needed is a bit of adhesive to assemble the postcard mailing box: “‘White’ glue of the animal variety is recommended, particularly the brand made from horses or reclaimed pets.”

In the context of *Acme* no. 12, “Our Spring Novelty Library” sets up the satirical Waukosha postcard passages perfectly. Take for instance “Vista,” a little anti-pastoral prose poem where the pastoral trope of the *locus amoenus*, the “beautiful place,” is translated into a highway rest stop, topped off with parodies of the bucolic “flower catalog”:

No pine thicket, no birch grove, no apple orchard could hope to compete with the visual complexity of any scene selected from our contemporary interstate system, especially those cospes [sic] situated nearby the highway’s many entries and exits, where the fagged voyager might seek sustenance and succor in the various eateries and refueling stations. The broad sweep of power lines, the delicate articulation of poles, signs, and warning lights, and the deep forest of advertisements all conspire to occasion countless views of complicated beauty [...]. Much history may be witnessed: the dinner wrappers, the emptied tins of flavored waters, and the frying pools of saliva all whispering a tale to those who might listen over the roar of the passing traffic. Such a fecund landscape! Such a rich heritage—oh! but it only could be frozen in time, for future generations to cherish.

While these postcards with their miniscule small print and dotted lines for cutting out do appear in the collected reprints, they have lost their position as the second of two antipastoral brackets for *Acme* no. 12, and exert a subtly different weight. *Acme* no. 12 shows the awkward lunch that Jimmy and his father have at Pam’s Wagon Wheel, with the even more awkward phone call to his mother in Chicago, followed by the chance meeting of Jimmy’s grandfather walking by. Jimmy is then brought back to the apartment, where his father tries to have a heart-to-heart talk, promising with some tears that things will be better between them. He leaves on an errand, and little do we or Jimmy know that it is the last we will ever hear of him. Jimmy’s nap is interrupted by a phone call from the sheriff, and the issue ends with the pathetic fallacy of rain blowing across a purple evening sky, with the McDonald’s arches looming darkly in the background, as this silhouette has done some pages earlier during the meeting with Jimmy’s grandfather.

Re-placing the postcards here adds an even more melancholy sense of anti-pastoral suspense and foreboding. In the reprints, the

page of postcards serves simply as a fence between the already temporally divided *Acme* no. 11 material, set in the nineteenth century, and no. 12, set in the graphic novel's present. By contrast, the reader of *Acme* no. 12 is brought back by the postcards to the present spring and may have the sweetness of anticipation, familiar to the readers of serials, of wondering exactly how long it will be before this bump in the narrative will be resolved. Here the reader of the reprint has just the recto of the 1893 Exposition, and can get caught up in the long sequence of the *Acme* no. 13 material, in which Jimmy's grandfather is ultimately abandoned by the great-grandfather. Unfortunately, the reprint reader is likely to miss the parallelisms that this issue structure made quite clear: *Acme* no. 12 ends in the present, in darkness, as we know something terrible has happened to Jimmy's father; *Acme* no. 13 begins and ends with splash pages of the Columbian Exposition; and *Acme* no. 14 begins with the purple sky and the silhouetted McDonald's arches like no. 12, but instead of rain, there is snow: we are temporarily in an intermediate phase, clued as the late 1970s, when the young adopted Amy is doing her school report on the Columbian Exposition, and learns from her and Jimmy's grandfather that blacks were only allowed in to the fair for a day or two.

#### **Anti-Pastoral in Other *Acme Novelty Library* Paratexts (Nos. 13 and 14)**

The cover of *Acme* no. 13 (dated "autumn 1999") encapsulates many of the elements of Ware's postmodern aesthetics and the anti-pastoral thematics evident elsewhere in *Jimmy Corrigan*. The ornate multicolored title and the equally ornamental flowery borders recall late nineteenth-century printing styles, and the color palette is decidedly Victorian: deep gray background, light and dark green floral borders, and tan letters with scarlet and maroon accents and orange rosettes. The tautological title itself, *My New Novelty Library*, and the bright orange inset medallion, with a blank to indicate whom "this booklet belongs to," suggests that this is a parody of children's literature. The satiric tone is carried to the bottom of the cover, which lists the publisher (with more of the nineteenth-century orthographical flavor: "Seattle, the Fanta-Graphics & Sons Company, licensed by The Acme Novelty Concern, Chicago") and the retail cost, as "our most preposterous price yet." Two additional medallions, portraying the overweight superhero-costumed figure, form a short anti-pastoral comic strip. The first medallion shows the "superhero" exiting a comics store clutching a volume that seems to be the same volume we are holding (it is colored in the same gray and green). It appears to be early evening, and the urban environment is blighted: the store's signboard hangs askew, and the sidewalk is filthy and covered with trash, including a discarded hypodermic needle. The prominent yellow fire hydrant recalls the Great Fire and anchors the thumbnail of skyline in the background as downtown Chicago. The second medallion shows our superhero later that night (the stars and a crescent moon are out), apparently at home, slouched in a chair and with *Acme* no. 13 dangling from his right hand. Seemingly caught

up in a reverie occasioned by his reading, he is sniffing a rose that he holds to his nose with his left hand, and a large tear emerges from under his eye mask and hangs on his cheek. In the room where he sits, he is surrounded by various pastoral emblems: a ewer filled with flowers, a bird that perches on his shoulder, and on the sideboard, we can just make out a peach. Given the medallion's compression, we may not be sure about the identity of some of the objects (a hairbrush or hand mirror on the floor? a chamber pot? a candle on the vanity?), but the room's traditional furnishings and décor seem to locate us back again in the late nineteenth century of Jimmy's grandfather.

To speculate for a moment on Ware's intentions here in the cover of *Acme* no. 13, it seems that he has cast the traditional comic book superhero as both a contemporary alternative-comics antihero (a geeky, overweight comic book collector) and as a pre-modern nostalgic who wishes he had been born back in that traditional Victorian-Edwardian era. The rhetorical and aesthetic strategy, then, is to put the superhero in an impossible position, a deconstructive double-bind of desire: he is the anti-hero who feels like a Rip Van Winkle, having awoken into an age that is not his own—and yet living in that earlier age is an impossibility for him, not only because he cannot reverse time, but also since comic book superheroes did not yet exist then in the form he embodies!

The satirical possibilities of anti-pastoral are pushed to the limit in other unique *Acme Novelty Library* bonus material, such as the comic strip "Summer at Home Can Be Fun!" (*Acme* no. 14). Two boys, apparently cousins, one from the country and one from the city, look back over the summer they have had, despite not being able to exchange places, as was originally planned. Jack, the country cousin, reminisces while holding a very generous shovelful of pig manure: "Gee, Dad, I guess it's not so bad helping out here this summer. [...] Uncle Al made that corn whiskey and taught me how to jerk off in the back of his Pontiac," which is pictured up on cinder blocks, without its wheels. "And I had a great time at the country fair beating up those immigrants!" Meanwhile, Hank, the city cousin, is cruising in the city harbor with an unidentified man dressed in a superhero costume. Despite not trading visits with Jack, Hank likewise has found plenty to occupy himself: "Remember the 'private party' we had at the yacht club?" Hank and a young woman are shown putting their clothes on. "And that primo shit that Jimmy scored last week? It rocked!" Judging from how Jimmy has his arm tied off, the drug in question is probably heroin. Fortunately, Hank also has the latest issue of *The Acme Novelty Library* to keep himself occupied: "Forget that hayseed Jack—we city kids know what's phat!" The superhero character seems to smirk knowingly. The anti-pastoral sentiment here replays the familiar country cousin/city cousin stereotypes, featuring various contrasting markings of their relative class status and sophistication: dirty manual labor versus leisured recreation, masturbation versus sex, dead cars versus yachts, home-made liquor versus purchased drugs. Following out the careful parallelism that Ware has planted in the strip, Jack's beating of the immigrants is echoed by Hank's purchase of the comic book—sug-

gesting that, in neat anti-pastoral fashion, a comic book is merely a citified diversion from committing actual crimes and violence in the rural wilds. At best, the comic book is in lieu of the actual pastoral retreat that Hank might have taken. This seems singularly appropriate, given that "Summer at Home Can Be Fun!" appears in the inside front cover of the eighth and final *Acme* installment of *Jimmy Corrigan*, in which Jimmy's retreat to Waukosha comes to an abrupt and frustrating conclusion.

Read as the final number of the serialization, *Acme* no. 14 seems particularly slow and painfully conclusive—we feel that Jimmy is back exactly where he started, with no more resolution about his identity than when he started. And, at 96 pages, *Acme* no. 14 draws out the final movement of the graphic novel begun in the equally expansive *Acme* no. 13 (eighty-four pages; the other six numbers were all thirty-two pages). The cover of *Acme* no. 14 also announces its length in the usual self-deprecating tiny print:

the final explosive installment of our amateur nouvelle graphique. / 96 pages of breathless action, romance, and naturalistic poppycock / securing our reputation as the industry's leading voice of meaningless formal experimentation / and the virtues of sacrificing emotion sympathy and love to fancy colors & zingy typography. / Sucking the LIFE BLOOD from comics since 1993.

The cover is dominated by a bright pink background and a shell with a large pearl incised with the boy genius's features. The Spanish inscription on the pearl (*la perla de la industria*) connects to a tiny caravel sailing across a body of water labeled *El mer de Michigan*, echoing with the 400th anniversary of Columbus's voyage that was celebrated by Jimmy's great grandfather in conjunction with the World's Columbian Exhibition (and the much less lauded 500th anniversary of 1992, not long before Ware began serializing *Jimmy Corrigan* in Chicago's *New City* newspaper). The caravel's destination, however, appears to be Waukosha, Michigan, which would make it on Lake Michigan's eastern shore, and like the Spanish bringing peaches to the New World,<sup>10</sup> Jimmy bears a basket of fruit complete with a peach as a gift for his father. As with Columbus's journey, however, Jimmy's destination is not what he expects it to be, and he will return thinking that he has utterly failed and has discovered nothing.

Such is the anti-pastoral conclusion to the frustrated dynamic of retreat and return in the final installment of *Jimmy Corrigan*. Believing in the first place that he is the cause of his father's car accident, Jimmy is shocked to learn of his father's subsequent death from internal bleeding, and, thinking that he has been definitively rejected by his adoptive sister (and actual cousin) Amy, leaves the hospital and directly boards a train home to Chicago. There the next day, barely able to get out of bed, he has the usual depressing Thanksgiving dinner in the cafeteria at his mother's retirement home. He is unable to confess that he has been to see his estranged father (never mind that his father is dead), in part because he is distracted by the surprising news that his mother has for him: she is engaged to be

married to a man from the retirement home. Making his usual tired excuses, Jimmy breaks away as soon as he can, but cannot conceive of returning to his empty apartment, so with snow falling, he goes in to the office. We now know that this downtown city corner, where we saw the superhero-costumed man jump to his death earlier, is the same spot where Jimmy's grandfather helped embody the living flag for the World's Columbian Exhibition, and which we also beheld before and after the devastation of the Great Chicago Fire. Jimmy remains completely oblivious of the historical connections.

Overcome by grief, Jimmy seems to be forced to give up on both Amy and Peggy, the mailroom girl, symbolized by the cheap key ring tags labeled with their names that he had bought as gifts. As he imagines jumping off of a neighboring building, he is suddenly startled by shuffling—a new office mate is also unexpectedly present, sharing the other half of the cubicle. He meets Tammy, who is there to get a head start on her first day at work, and she seems friendly and well-adjusted. Is this a glimmer of hope for Jimmy? The colors on the final page of Jimmy Corrigan brighten just a bit, and we realize that the orange of Tammy's hair is the same as that of the girl with whom Jimmy's grandfather fondly played in 1890's Chicago. She says it has been strange to be away from her family on Thanksgiving, noting that she was surprised by how many restaurants were open in downtown Chicago on Thanksgiving. She says, "Have you ever had Thanksgiving in a restaurant?" But Jimmy does not, and perhaps cannot, take the hint. Like so many of the women portrayed throughout the novel, Tammy's face is mostly or completely obscured every time it is pictured. The final frame, where Jimmy's brow knits in reflexive concern, leaves us wondering whether he will be able to have any more connection with this office mate than the previous one, who left after six months and wrote a note that claimed she had never been noticed once by Jimmy.

**The Artist-Superhero Attempts Suicide:  
"A Visit to the Acme Novelty Library" (Acme No. 11)**

In various paratextual material of *Jimmy Corrigan*, such as the rescue of "Copy #58,463," we see how the artist, Chris Ware, suggests that he alone may be the ultimate hope for salvaging the meaning and significance of the graphic novel. But even if he himself is the graphic novel's superhero, it is imbricated in a profoundly anti-pastoral vision of both his own authorship and the nature of superheroism itself. The quintessential expression of this theme in *Jimmy Corrigan* can perhaps be found in the comic strip found on the inside front and back covers of Acme no. 11 entitled "A Visit to the Acme Novelty Library." Parodying the "going behind the scenes at the studio" subgenre that can be traced to at least Walt Disney, this visit is imagined as a "personal guided tour of our facilities and many other things, relating to novelties, jokes, correspondences, etc." During "A Visit," we see a superhero-costumed Chris Ware figure attempt to kill himself, but he fails—and he rises up to continue working, heroically, on his comics.



Composed of two columns of miniature panels, "A Visit" satirically juxtaposes an overly jolly view of the workplace with a deeply depressive sense of the futility of creating comics. On the one hand, "it is fresh new day and Acme Novelties Library is already opening for business with its happy fun pictures and good time stories, & other items." By contrast, the next two panels show a figure whom we understand to be Chris Ware (with his characteristic glasses and kidney-shaped head), still in bed; first with a downcast mouth, then saying, "I am hating myself." The clashes between captions and images continue; instead of "the many workers of the Acme Novelties Library [...] chatting friendly about things relating to life before day of work is starting," we see Chris Ware peeing and flushing the toilet: "Few jobs are as fun as working at Acme Novelties Library." Here Chris Ware dons the red and blue superhero costume that has become iconic throughout *Jimmy Corrigan*, including the yellow cape and red eye mask. He then enters his workspace, but cannot get past the door: the sight of his drawing table on the far side of the room is too intimidating.

Like many creators, Ware decides to begin the day with a more mundane task: "The very thought of work makes me retch; instead, I shall review my correspondence, and, perhaps, in the praise of others, I may find the will to persevere." But of course, he is not so lucky. The first letter asks about how "Jimmy Corrigan" might be adapted as a movie, imagining "of course, the huge disappointments: what happened to my favorite scene? And what kind of ending is *that*? And who the hell put Michael Keaton in it? Did you read the comic? Everybody hates it now." Deflated, our author-superhero responds, "I admit, this scenario is plausible; however, since I am a graphic artist, I control the aesthetic result, and, consequently, I am not emotionally affected by such negative speculation." The second letter proves no better, complaining about Ware's "hand lettering skills." "Now I feel much worse," says our superhero-author, "indeed, almost incapacitated. [...] I weep. / Now I will review my recent efforts with fresh eyes; in my weakened state I may find truth and a sense of my relative worth to mankind." Here the reader must turn to the inside back cover of *Acme* no. 11, where the paratext continues.

On reflection, the superhero-author feels that all is for naught: "Sentimental garbage I have made, of no value to anyone!" Another ironically informative panel intervenes: "Quality control at the Acme Novelties Library finds itself as important as always, and numerous are the ways which it finds to control quality." "Many lies have I crafted; and yet, it is too late, as publication is now past," and our superhero is suddenly holding a revolver to his head—this is quality control in action! But the phone rings; is it "someone calling to salve my wounded spirit"? Another ironic voice-over suggests how many people daily are in contact with the Acme Novelties Library seeking comics. But, no: just a wrong number. Our author puts the pistol in his mouth and pulls the trigger, blowing off the back of his skull.

He lies there for a moment, intact except for the jagged hole in his occiput. He instantly has regrets: "I love life, and now I am robbed of it. / And what cruel irony: I only can now think of the many things which I shall no longer enjoy!" Four medallions signify

these activities, and each has a distinct pastoral ambience: “hearing birdies sing” and “making clover garlands”—birds and flowers being perennial bucolic symbols; “remembering grandma,” apparently deceased, recalled as flying a kite with our hero (the pastoral elegy, especially the lament for the dead shepherd, is a common bucolic subgenre); and “buying things,” specifically a banjo, recalling the symbolic importance of music throughout the pastoral mode. “If only I had been qualified to capture these moments in art,” mourns our dying superhero. Ironically, of course, Ware has just done so.

But all is not lost. After a time, the superhero author wonders why he is still not dead. Fondling his opened skull, he suddenly sees a brilliant image: “What an unexpected array of designs and mandalas do I see when I strum upon my exposed nerve bundles...” He experiments further, wondering if he might be given some kind of transcendent truth to be revealed in this way, but unfortunately “there was no truth, only pretty pictures.” Nonetheless, he bandages up his head and takes heroically again to the air: “as my injury does not seem to be fatal, I accept my lot and return to work refreshed as a diagrammatic humorist.” In the final panel, he is back at his drawing table, chuckling about how good his life is as a maker of stories for The Acme Novelty Library. And as we shall see when the work as a whole has been completed, Ware ends “A Visit” with an apology: “much apologizing to those who have read all the way through to this ending.”

#### Conclusion:

#### On the Seasonality of Serial Comics and Their Paratexts

Read as the sprawling graphic novel that it is, *Jimmy Corrigan* impresses us with the obstinate reclusivity of its title character, as if the sad-sack loser/antihero of alternative comics has been blown up to the size of a float at Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade. But, this perception is, in part, a transtextual reflection of how we read *Jimmy Corrigan* now: not in doses, as a serial alternative comic, in the way it was originally created and published, but as a novel-sized tome, as it has subsequently been collected. Above, I have tried to show how various paratexts from *The Acme Novelty Library* have been “lost” in this republication process, but in this transition there is another, related loss: the peculiarities of the reading experience of the serial format. It is a different thing to read serially than it is to read novelistically, and one of the key differences is the loss of temporal punctuality—the immediate seasonal context of serial publication. Since issues of *The Acme Novelty Library* emerged once or twice per year on no fixed schedule, or “irregularly,” as we say with serial publications, each of its appearances itself was something for Ware to be self-conscious about, and an obvious occasion to exercise his familiar poses of authorial “anxiety” and aesthetic “failure” (Ball). It is also a space for elaborating the anti-pastoral theme, especially when one of *The Acme Novelty Library* numbers came out in spring, as was the case for Acme no. 12 (“Our Spring Novelty Library”).

Given how its possible importance for interpretation has been revealed even in this short space, it is to be hoped that this paratextual

material will eventually be made more widely available, perhaps when a complete edition of Chris Ware's work is contemplated, since it surely does affect the interpretation of the graphic novel as a whole. In this respect, one interesting parallel to *Jimmy Corrigan* is Charles Burns' *Black Hole*, whose serial issues contained front and back matter with important commentary about the mysterious "bug" that was not included in the Pantheon trade volume (Collins). For both authors and texts, the differences between serial and omnibus may involve much more than that of "variant covers," and can significantly affect interpretation. Generally, because of how commonplace it is for comics to be initially created in serial form and then republished in collected volumes, critical-bibliographical attention must be paid in the study of graphic literature to account for any prominent differences between such subsequent publications, and the focus should be especially close on those ephemeral but revealing paratexts.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> There is a double fallacy of equivocation here: by aesthetically "autonomous" we should mean "formally independent," not "disconnected"; by aesthetically "original" we should mean "uniquely inventive," not "never before seen."

<sup>2</sup> This notice has sometimes been misquoted in blurbs as calling *Jimmy Corrigan* the "first masterpiece" more generally of the graphic novel form. This does a disservice to various comics pioneers and other, earlier texts acknowledged as masterpieces of graphic literature, such as Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, among many others.

<sup>3</sup> Pope (1688-1744) relates that he wrote the four poems (named after the seasons) in 1704. He seems to have been inspired by the wide reading in European literature that he was doing at the time, namely in his family's extensive library, excluded as he was (as a Catholic) from institutional schooling. In any case, Pope's pastorals were published in 1709, the year he turned 21, along with his own critical (and well-considered) introduction to the form.

<sup>4</sup> The city motto of Chicago, *urbs in horto*, Latin for "city in a garden," underscores its own pastoral pretensions.

<sup>5</sup> We should note here that this reading of the sequence as bracketed by more pastoral scenery is only fully possible in the reprint volumes, since the battle scene is at the very end of its original *Acme Novelty Library* serial volume (no. 8). The corresponding bird appears at the beginning of *Acme* no. 9, after two other paratexts: the intervening back cover of no. 8 and the front cover of no. 9. See below for more discussion of how these and other paratexts are "lost" in the course of reprinting *Jimmy Corrigan* as a single volume.

<sup>6</sup> The figure, a subset of the conceptual metaphor linking people and plants, can be found as early as Homer, where the Trojan warrior Gorgythion's head flops over like a top-heavy poppy (*Iliad* 3.306-08). This simile was memorable enough to be adapted in turn by the lyric poet Stesichorus (fl. 6th cent. BCE), who in the now fragmentary poem *Geryoneis*, on Heracles' labor, likens the killing of Geryon to the drooping of a poppy. The Roman poet Catullus uses the figure in a love poem, when he refers to his frustrated love as a flower nicked by a passing plough, adding a surprisingly tragic note, as if rejection has been like being killed in war (*Carmina* 11.21-24).

<sup>7</sup> References to *Jimmy Corrigan* are from the unpaginated paperback edition, unless otherwise specified. No attempt is made to reproduce consistently any bolding, italics, all capitals, etc., of inked letters, unless, in certain cases, such emphasis appears essential to the sense of the passage in question.

<sup>8</sup> This series of four covers, along with an accompanying one-page comic, were released as a poster-sized portfolio in *Acme Novelty Library* 18 1/2 (self-published by Ware in 2007).

<sup>9</sup> Here and henceforth, a slash in a quotation of comics indicates that the dialogue continues in a different speech bubble in an adjacent panel.

<sup>10</sup> A detail noted in two places in *Jimmy Corrigan*: by the coughing old man in the Waukoshia airport, and in the entry for "Peach" in the "Corrigenda" section.

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