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From Prose to Panel: Negotiating Visual Modality and Authenticity in the Comic-Book Adaptation of a Literary Memoir

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Introduction

1 This article addresses the graphic-novelisation of the literary memoir and, in particular, the conceptual and practical challenges faced by the comic-strip artist in the realisation of the adapted work. This subject has a particular relevance to my current project, involving the adaptation of the working-class autobiography *Pilgrimage from Nenthead*, penned by a pitman from the North-East of England in the mid nineteen-thirties. The tale is a fascinating one, all the more so because the pitman concerned, Chester Armstrong, is my great-grandfather—consequently, there is an unusual familial connection to negotiate in the process of mediation. The adaptation of the *Pilgrimage* text, from the linguistic mode into the multimodal medium of comics presents an opportunity to engage directly with my great-grandfather's testimony; to visualise, to expand, to interpolate through the lens of the present. The final adapted text, provisionally titled *The Checkweighman*, will comprise five chapters plus a prologue and epilogue. The method and approach expressed here is written from the vantage point of a practitioner who is still in the midst of formulating a coherent response to the source text and draws upon a range of critical material to articulate a practice-led approach to adaptation.

Adaptation and the comic-book

2 Critical approaches to adaptation, as the process and product of transference, have traditionally focused upon fidelity matters, media specificity and comparative studies (most commonly between literature works and their staged or filmed counterparts) but has shifted more recently towards a more pluralistic appreciation of adapted works (Leitch 2-4). Academic output since the start of the millennium has sought to rescope the field of adaptation studies in response to the growing sophistication of interactive new-media narratives (including videogames and online storyworlds) and the "ever-expanding network of textual relations and value-systems" (Sanders 4) which typifies the internet age of connectivity and media exchange. Central to this diverse yet convergent mediascape is the maxim that "any text is an intertext" (Barthes 1981, 39), a viewpoint which stresses the implicit connection between narratives and across multiple narrative forms, signalling that authorship (and readership) is affected directly or obliquely by the author's (and reader's) prior knowledge and media consumption. To a certain extent, current debates around intertextual connections and interdisciplinary approaches have tested the parameters of what can be considered as adaptation. Adaptive variances on a source text range from the "faithful-retelling", to the tenuously linked "inspired-by", to the "imagining" of undisclosed parts of the original narrative, to the "adaptation-of-the-adaptation". As an example of the latter, see Kate Newell's consideration of how L. Frank Baum's illustrated novel *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900) has spawned a plethora of film, stage, and videogame versions, some of which appropriate the iconography from previous adaptations as opposed to Baum's original literary source (Newell 10). Although critical discourse in this area is still dominated by the "literary text to moving image" variety, the field of adaptation studies has expanded and shifted to consider other cross-disciplinary approaches and forms of re-mediation, including the comic-strip.

3 The adaptation of a literary text into a long-form comic book offers both potential as well as formal constraints in what the medium can and cannot do. The published comic book shares an obvious commonality with the novel in that it is a portable medium, designed to be printed on paper stock, and bound sequentially into pages which allow the reader to consume the narrative at their own pace; to skip ahead, to read out-of-sequence, to revisit particular passages, to leave and return to at will. Similar to a novel, the plotting of a comic book will often mobilise around hinge points in the story that signify changes in the action or setting. Furthermore, chapter endings may echo their literary counterpart (Kukkonen 80) in the coalescing of events in the narrative at a given point, affecting a dramatic cliff-hanger or sense of closure.

4 In regard to formatting, one obvious and distinguishing aspect of the graphic work is that the page architecture and panel layout is often predesigned and inextricably fixed, so cannot "spill over" onto subsequent pages. Double-page spreads comprising of left-hand (verso) and right-hand (recto) configurations are often designed to form a complementary relationship, aesthetically and narratively, and encourage the reader towards the "reveal" actioned by the turn of the recto page. In *The System of Comics* (27-39), Thierry Groensteen posits the idea that, even if the story is primarily conveyed through image and verbal content, it is composed and sequenced via an underlying gridwork of interrelated frames or "multiframe". Some of the frames within

the multiframe are positively demarked (panel borders, exposition boxes and dialogue balloons), and some are inferred (the negative spaces or "gutters" between panels, the perimeter of each panel-strip and the "hyperframe", the invisible contour around all of the rendered parts of the page). Groensteen extends the frame-partitioning hypothesis to encompass the single-page and double-page spread, and page margins and edges.

5 As this suggests, the organisation and design of a comic-book page involves navigating a complex set of mathematical and spatial relations not found elsewhere in other narrative forms. Transporting the literary memoir into the comic-book requires a perceptual shift from the purely linguistic mode to the multi-modal (verbal, visual, sequential, and geometrical). Furthermore, in a comic-strip the ascendency clearly lies with the image-content but the verbal-content, enclaved in boxes and balloons, provides essential supplementary information that both confirms and expands the visual narrative.

6 The modal peculiarities of the strip format and the engagement of two main tracks to convey the story (one visual and one verbal) complicate the process of translating the substance and metre of a literary source. When transcoding elements of the text-bound story into a medium that is predominately visual, it is tempting for the adapter to look for points of mutual exchange between linguistic and image-based sign systems. In practice however, there are self-evident differences between "verbal" and "visual" modes of storytelling. Simply put, being told a story is not the same as being shown it. Literary works in the western tradition are intended to be scrolled by the reader from the top to bottom, verso to recto pages, to propel the narrative forwards. The word-based narrative of a literary text can be categorised at a fundamental level as comprised of two simultaneous processes; articulation (of formative units—single words, phrases, and sentences) and "integration, which gathers these units into units of a higher rank (this being *meaning*)" where narrative is constructed (Barthes 1982, 117). Cognition and understanding are conditional on the ability of the reader to locate meaning in the "integration" of language, to process conceptual equivalences and narrative relations in their imagination and is reliant on their prior lived experience, or their mediated connection with the world. Conversely, the dominant visuality of a comic book and the prominence of image-content shifts the readerly function away from pure mental imaging into "the realm of direct perception" (Hutcheon 23). Scott McCloud concurs that comic-book images are "received information" whereas comic-book text is "perceived information" (McCloud 1994, 49). Actually, drawn images are complex and multi-faceted signs, requiring a "knowledge of learned competencies and cultural assumptions" (Nodelman 17) to render them comprehensible to the reader.

7 It is clear that the hand-rendered illustration does not manifest the same level of verisimilitude conveyed by other image-based media, particularly the cinematic frame and the photograph. Whilst acknowledging the impact that contemporary digital forms have had on the creation and manipulation of documentary media, the photographic image can still be argued as iconic or bearing the closest correspondence to the real-world, due in part to a mechanical process of capture and reproduction. In the case of comics, strip illustrations present an abstracted or compendious realism and can be considered as inconstant, occupying a point of reference somewhere in between the image-code and the linguistic-code. This is especially true of pictograms or symbolic icons used as a metaphoric shorthand in the narrative (e.g., character emotions), sound-effect onomatopoeia and the expressive rendering of text within balloons. These

elements are unique to the visuality of the comic-page yet require a level of concept-processing that appears closer to language comprehension. Rather than see the illustrated panel as a reduction in the truthful complexity of the photograph, it may be more fitting to see it as an image-sign that amplifies meaning "through simplification" (McCloud 1994, 30) and that arguably, the key role of comic-strip artist is to render meaningfully what is "essential".

8 The influence of lens-based modes of representation, particularly cinema, can be found within comic-strip narratives. Comics tend to co-opt cinematic composition strategies such as camera angles and viewpoints, including the framing of the human figure (Lee & Buscema 30). This is an indication, perhaps, of a predominant cinematic visuality in western culture and would appear to conform to the postulation of the filmic unconscious, a perspective that foregrounds "the tools of the cinematographer in our cognitive assembly and recall of everyday experience" (Dittmer 223). The narrativisation of historical texts, fictional and non-fictional, into film and television production is still seen as the most widely accessed form of adaptation. The cinematic depiction brings a certainty and coherence to true-life stories, borne out of an extended and concentrated scripting and production process (involving whole creative teams), that leads to the creation of moments of heightened reality. As Hilary Mantel argues though, cinematic framing is an act of construction that underscores the process of mediation as what is "out of shot is lost to us [in] the very act of observing and recording, a gap has opened between the event and its transcription" (2). Crucially, the cinematic shot has a precise length between one edit and the next, marking out specific temporal intervals. In contrast, the comic-book page represents a partitioned spatial and temporal visuality which is unfixed, further accentuated by the unrendered or negative spaces within panel-images and page-guttering. Therefore, in relative terms, the time indicated by a single panel or sequence of panels is indefinite. Moreover, any reading of time-space relations is complicated by a cluster of other factors, including panel shape and proportions, panel transitions, the tension between image and verbal registers, the level of detail and where the artist's representational style sits on the axis between abstraction and realism (Eisner 31-37; McCloud 1994, 14). The comic-book borrows heavily from cinematic time-space scene-setting yet diverts from "these structuring elements, holding forth possibilities of simultaneity and polyphony" (Dittmer 223).

9 In a literary work the reader's eye will tend to focus upon and scan a body of verbal text in a prescribed order that fits with learnt or habitual patterns of readership, the sequencing of which is essential in fully comprehending the author's intended meaning. In contrast, the consumption of a comic-book page is not so predictable or one-directional, it is more realistic to see the reading experience as "plurivectorial" (Groensteen 108-10). The reader of a comic-book will optically traverse the page in a variety of ways. Individual panels on the page can be "consumed" as part of an image-chain or skipped and then returned to. The gaze may also telescope in and out of the panel formation altogether, absorbing the whole page or double-page spread in one moment and "alighting on a single panel detail in the next" (Dodds 44). Importantly, the fragmentary nature of a comic-book invites the reader to access and actively participate in the assembly of narrative, to render the separate panel "units" comprehensible by imagining the parts that are not shown (McCloud 1994, 62-66). When dealing with memoir and true-life tales this can be particularly effective as it allows the artist to probe the boundaries of the form, to create "new structures for the

self to inhabit" (Chaney 6) and convey meanings beyond the reach of either pictures or words alone.

The adaptive process

10 Before detailing the project in hand, it would be useful to set out some guiding remarks concerning the adaptive process. If the product of adaptation can be defined as "an announced and extensive transposition of a particular work or works" (Hutcheon 7), it follows that this cannot be a literal transcription or carbon-copy, as it is dependent on the modality of the destination medium, and the approach taken by the adapter in the handling of the original materials. Whilst it is palpably true that adapted texts are created and received in relation to an existing source, in some way interconnected or derivative, they can also be classified as unique entities both formally and aesthetically. As Mantel contends, adaptation should not be thought of as "a secondary process, a set of grudging compromises but an act of creation in itself" (2).

11 Adapters may want to pay homage to a source text, but they may also wish to dispute aspects of the original narrative or attitudes in the narration, to update and present anew for different audiences and tastes. The adaptive process may probe the bounds of authorship as it shows that "form (expression) can be separated from content (ideas)" (Elliott cited in Hutcheon 9). This is why the notion of "fidelity" in adaptation criticism is not a helpful one. The creator of an adaptation may respond to or alter the content of a source text in a variety of ways; for example, shifting the socio-political or historical context, transposing between genres, changing the narrative frame from fact to fiction, switching the narrator voice, rearranging the sequence of events, choosing a different point of focalisation or departure, emphasising, or underplaying particular plotlines and effecting a parallel commentary or intervention. This is by no means an exhaustive list but serves as an indication of the plethora of possibilities open to the adapter and the fact that the adaptation process invariably involves a series of choices, involving a complex and sustained "intertextual engagement with the adapted work" (9).

12 For a creative work to fulfil the criterion as an adaptation there needs to be a perceptible thematic and narrative link between the source text and the adapted text. The story, the causal chain of events and character actions, is the common transported factor in most adaptations. For the audience, familiarity with the characters and narrative in the source text can make for a heightened reading or viewing experience of the adapted work. Consumption is charged with recognition and recollection: comfort in the known, pleasure or disagreement sparked by the plotting, casting or re-imaging choices made by the adapter (Newell 8). However, in regard to my own adaptation project, prior familiarity with the source text cannot be counted upon and there is not a roster of previous *Oz*-like derivatives to compare to. This paper concerns the adaptation of an obscure literary text, long out of print. Unless you are a scholar of early working-class biography, a social historian of North-East England mining communities, or related to the author (which is the case here) then the likelihood of having come across Chester Armstrong's *Pilgrimage from Nenthead* is slim (see fig. 1). The research is still ongoing to uncover how a pitman from an industrial North-East town, whose official schooling was ended at age thirteen, came to write a literary memoir

that was published by one of the leading British publishers of the age. The answer, when found, will provide a fascinating addition or subtext in the adaptation narrative.

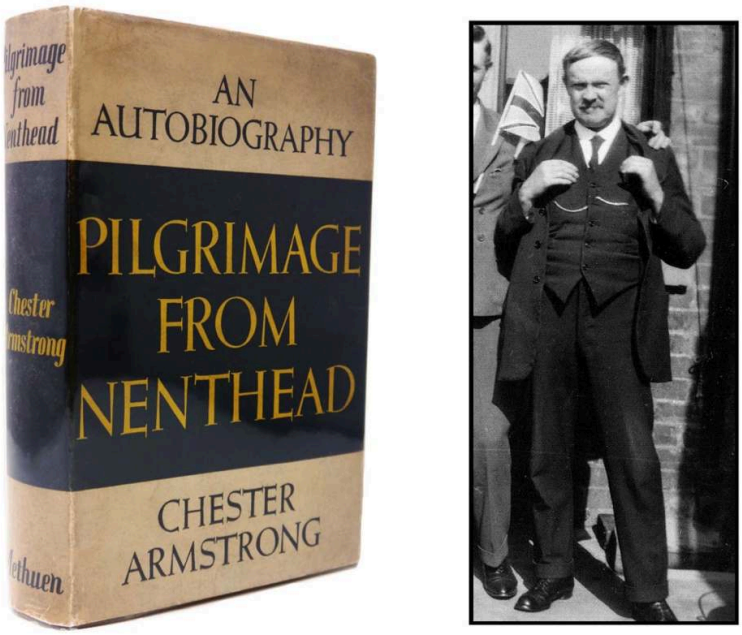

Figure 1. Chester Armstrong, *Pilgrimage from Nenthead* (London: Methuen 1938). Photographs of i) original dust jacket design and ii) Chester Armstrong (Date unknown) from the family archive, © Nick Dodds

Unpacking the source text: Pilgrimage from Nenthead

13 In some respects, *Pilgrimage from Nenthead* presents as a conventional literary memoir. Events in the early chapters are told chronologically and recount Chester's parentage and upbringing in the lead-mining town of Nenthead, situated in a remote part of East-Cumberland and idealised in the text as an "object lesson in the study of social politics" (Armstrong 10). The family migrates to the colliery town of Ashington, Northumberland, in November 1881 for economic reasons and to preserve the health of Chester's father William. The upheaval is obviously a palpable shock to the adolescent Chester who likens himself to a "plant that is torn up and placed in new soil" (52). Along with his father and two elder brothers he soon commences his working life as a screen boy for Ashington Coal Company (A.C.C). The family's arrival coincides with a period of increased coal production both locally and nationally, to service industrial growth at home and ambitions of empire abroad. The fortunes and dominance of the A.C.C forms the immediate backdrop to Chester's narrative, not mentioned by name but by inference only.

14 The Ashington Coal Company, supported by the local landed gentry and run by wealthy, influential partners began operations in the late eighteen-sixties effectively monopolising employment (as well as town planning and municipal affairs) in the locality until the nationalisation of the coal industry under a post-war Labour government in 1947. The A.C.C were able to exploit the favourable site geology and untapped coal reserves, forming a reputation as "one the biggest, most profitable, and most innovative mining companies" in the British Isles during the late-nineteenth and

early-twentieth centuries (Hall 11). To some historians, the privatized British coal industry of this period represented a "grotesque parody of the social structure of the country as a whole" (Pollard 11). Recalling his boyhood introduction to pit-life, Chester is stark in his assessment of the fate awaiting him as a life-long colliery worker yet aware enough to see the broader political mechanism at play:

> The early stages of getting into the industrial harness were painful in many ways, the sense of absolute impotence being the most acute. There was a painful numbness of mind in the realisation of this wholesale system of compression; a revulsion of feeling at having to submit slavelike to drastic compulsion; and that sense of utter bewilderment consequent on being abandoned to such a fate. (Armstrong 66-67)

15 There are several key aspects to the *Pilgrimage to Nenthead* text. Firstly, as a document of social history, the book deals with family life, the rapid expansion of Ashington as a booming colliery town in the late-nineteenth century as well as the habitual aspects of community living and vibrancy of local associations. This raises a phenomenological dimension in regard to the adaptation. Chester wrote the memoir in his late sixties, in retirement from the colliery, and as such the text is a witness account of a life lived in a particular location and circumstance. Even accounting for the fallibility of memory, his testimony is uniquely framed by his own first-hand experience and psychological outlook, which is impossible to replicate. An obvious point perhaps, but worth stating nonetheless because it has relevance to the visualisation or dramatic reconstruction of events. As Mantel argues, "history is not the past - it is a method we have evolved of organising our ignorance of the past" (4). The chronicled material evidence available to the adapter of a true-life account is always partial and fraught with omissions, silences and crossings-out.

16 Establishing an "authentic" story-world is a key driver of the adapted graphic work (a backdrop reflecting the period and tone of the original text), whilst acknowledging that any attempt at accuracy is compromised by informational gaps and alterations made as a consequence of transportation across media forms. The facts that underlie the *Pilgrimage* narrative can be corroborated by local historians (for example, see the listed works of former Ashington mine-worker Mike Kirkup), various academic accounts, and the study of town maps from the period covered in the adaptation. A comparison of Ordnance Survey maps of Ashington published in 1866 and 1897 show a remarkable development in the expansion of colliery housing, municipal buildings, public recreational spaces as well as the emergence of a flourishing high street with shops and businesses to service the growing working population. Walking around present-day Ashington, some of the architectural fabric from that time still exists but the world, both in physical and anthropogeographic terms, that Chester wrote about is long gone. The former Armstrong family home in the Eighth Row is still there, as are some of the town churches and municipal buildings, but the pit (which was prominently situated at the head of the town) has long been decommissioned and the site remodelled as a business park.

17 In early stages of the project, it was important to read around Chester's text to contextualise the narrative and underpin the visualisation of the storyworld. This has meant sourcing a variety of documentation; including, family records, social-history accounts, archived newspaper columns and photographic referents in regard to Nenthead and Ashington for the time period covered in Chester's memoir. In the final analysis however, no matter how thorough this unearthing process is, it can only

provide a restricted access to the exterior details of a true-life account. The visual depiction and rendering of historical events and scenes from a present-day vantage point necessitate reconstruction from existing materials (which are partial and unstable) and imagined simulation (where no prior evidence exists). Effectively, in committing to the process of visualisation, the subject becomes the "retrieval of memory and ultimately, the creation of memory" (Spiegelman 2011, 73).

18 One of the creative choices faced here concerns the act of authentication, how best to mobilise any auxiliary historical or contextual material in the content of the final adapted work; whether to adopt a light-touch approach (for example, concentrating on the consistency of period detail in panel visuals) or alternatively, exert a meta-commentary or explicit intervention in the narrative. The latter may include the addition of expositional passages (not included in the original source) to help situate the story for the reader; or the insertion of facsimiles of historical documents, as referents of "realness" (maps, diagrams, photographs and so on) to verify the events in the text. This is a common practice used by practitioners working within the field of graphic life-writing (see Spiegelman 1992, 134; Bechdel 126-127; Talbot & Talbot 2). Given my familial connection with Chester's memoir, to a certain extent I have felt entitled to interact with and intervene in the narrative, as opposed to simply arranging and illustrating the text. This has meant taking possession of the story and "filtering it, in a sense, through one's own sensibility, interests, and talents" (Hutcheon 18). Therefore, the final adapted work will incorporate some expositional material, signifying that the adaptive process involves both performance (retelling the story in artistic terms) and interposition (to authenticate, pay homage to or contest). Furthermore, the inclusion of scenes and sequences from the present-day make explicit that this is a strategy of mediation, that the story has been filtered through a complementary yet different narrating viewpoint.

19 However, it is important to note that *Pilgrimage from Nenthead* is more than an eyewitness account of family life and everyday scenes from an industrial town in a bygone age. The memoir has the flavour of a confessional and there is greater prominence in the text given to the inner world of the mind, to the distillation of the political, the social and the spiritual. The early Nenthead chapters cover Chester's childhood in a devoutly religious household. Due to its proximity to the Primitive Methodist chapel the family home is the preferred meeting place for the parish elders, affording Chester opportunities to observe the way adults interact and debate devotional and secular matters. As a child, attendance at all religious services was compulsory:

> The Sabbath day was shrouded in a religious halo, and, within the limits of possibility, it was unsullied by anything that was regarded as secular. In the home, the weekly periodicals - excepting the *Christian Herald* were all put away. Even the scissors were put beyond our reach. (Armstrong 43)

20 Thereafter, the memoir narrative traces his scepticism towards organised religion, from the sense of humiliation felt at his boyhood baptism to a profound questioning of the key tenets of methodism, in particular the concept of original sin of which he writes, "the whole scheme of redemption was based on the erroneous conception that human nature is primarily evil" (45). The pivotal episode in the book concerns Chester's public renouncing of religious doctrine and embracing of atheism. Interestingly, the text reveals nothing about how this decision affected relations with his close family (notably his pious father), an example of a gap in the original narrative

which will need to be addressed in the adaptation. Fuelling this move is a drive towards autodidactism and the desire to construct an alternative belief system forged by the knowledge gleaned from contemporary literature and socio-political texts. The book details his journey of discovery and illumination via the writings of Thomas Carlyle, Joseph Mazzini, John Ruskin, Richard Jefferies, Edward Carpenter, and the poet Walt Whitman in particular; Chester viewed Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* as "holy writ" (149). Writing as an older man, Chester is able to rationalize the raw events and environment that marked his life and do so learnedly with a cognisance acquired through reading. It follows that "knowledge as empowerment" is another key aspect in the original *Pilgrimage* text, to be interrogated further in the adapted work.

21 The entirety of Chester Armstrong's working life was spent as a surface worker at Ashington Colliery. *Pilgrimage from Nenthead* is cited as a prime example of working-class memoir in various academic accounts on British labour history (Rose 466), yet there is scant reference in the book to Chester's daily routine as a weighman at the colliery. Instead, Chester presents a detailed self-examination of the inner life of the mind, the impulse towards autodidacticism and the triumph of art and ideas over religious doctrine. It is the juxtaposition between the restrictive pit environment and the liberating force of imagination that forms the narrative thrust of the graphic adaptation. Overall, *Pilgrimage* is a varied mix of the public and the private, the factual and the confessional, the political and the psychological. All of which makes the task of adaptation and dramatization a challenging one, for which the comic-book medium is ideally placed.

The adaptation project: *The Checkweighman*

22 Embarking on a project of this scale can be daunting, so at the start I sought to enact a working strategy to address the complex process of selection and graphic interpretation. I envisaged that the adaptation would unfold incrementally through a series of stages; close-reading of the source text, contextualisation, auxiliary image-based research, plotting and scripting, proto-layouts, and panel thumbnailing; onto the final artwork and completion. Given the distinct, localised set of circumstances that Chester writes about, the first stage of the project involved an essential period of orientation to the historical, social, and geographical backdrop of the memoir. As already indicated, the dual motive here was to be able to situate Chester's memoir in time and place, and mobilise the intelligence (factual, text-based, photographic) in order to create a storyworld that was both authentic and visually tenable.

23 After a period of familiarisation with the subject, the original intention was to produce a written treatment so that all the key elements (visual cues, narration boxes, character dialogue, and additional author notes) would be in place prior to the rendering of the artwork. In actuality, after much notetaking and several false starts I came to the realisation that the "scripted" approach was not working as it was difficult to mentally scope-out the whole story arc of the final adapted (and extended) work, particularly as the intention is to produce a non-linear construct that moves between the past and the present. It also meant that the drawn elements were being pushed further and further back in the creative process. To address this, I identified the key themes and events in Chester's memoir (outlined in a previous section) and mapped them onto a basic "story infographic" which could fit onto a single side of A3 paper, comprising five main

chapter rectangles (containing the main story beats and events/scenes in each). This was useful in providing a ready blueprint for the graphic adaptation, to visualize the internal episodic structure of the piece and pinpoint where the main dramatic events would occur.

Transposing the verbal text

24 In approaching the graphic novelisation of Chester's memoir, I have followed a stepped procedure to translate story-telling strategies from the written text into image-based sequences. Firstly, the basic frame architecture of each page is established in tandem with the selection and configuration of Chester's text. A design choice made early on was to employ a standard nine-panel/three-strip page template, to make the drafting and editing process easier to handle and put in place a rhythmic structure consistent with the tenor of Chester's prose. Effectively, the panel-chain provides the "metronome giving measure to the narrative's shifts and fits" (Spiegelman, cited in Auster *et al.*, n.p.). The nine-panel formation has a certain symmetry and allows the artist to plot sequentially from top left to bottom right, zigzagging from one strip to the next yet simultaneously exploit the middle panel at the page centre (to arrest the eye of the reader). In practice, the actual number of panels per page is dependent on the story flow and partitioning of events and scenes. The nine-panel layout is flexible enough to allow for the expansion or contraction of panels in order to allow some images (e.g., establishing scenes) to 'breathe', to build suspenseful sequences or anticipate readerly pauses in the format (eg, strip-ellipses, page-turns).

25 Fig. 2 shows the initial steps of the adaptive process. On the left is page 13 from the *Pilgrimage from Nenthead* source-text with several passages highlighted. On the right is an early draft of Chapter 1, page 16 of the graphic adaptation (text and frames only) where I have reconfigured one of the selected passages across a nine-panel grid. There are several points of note here concerning the process of selection and placement. It is obviously not feasible (or desirable even) to include the whole of the source text in the adapted work, so decisions need to be made of what to include and what to sideline. The appropriation of written text from the original source and subsequent re-presentation in comic-book form will typically involve reduction and abridgement of verbal content, frequently resulting in a shorter adapted work (Kukkonen 75). There is a balance to be struck here between how much of the original memoir text is used and how much is represented in the visual track. The identification of particular passages from the *Pilgrimage* source-text can be seen as an opening move in the crossover process requiring aesthetic judgement which is partly instinctive and subjective. For the most part though, verbal passages have been selected because they register as pivotal episodes in the narrative or have the "image potential" to be transposed into the graphic work.

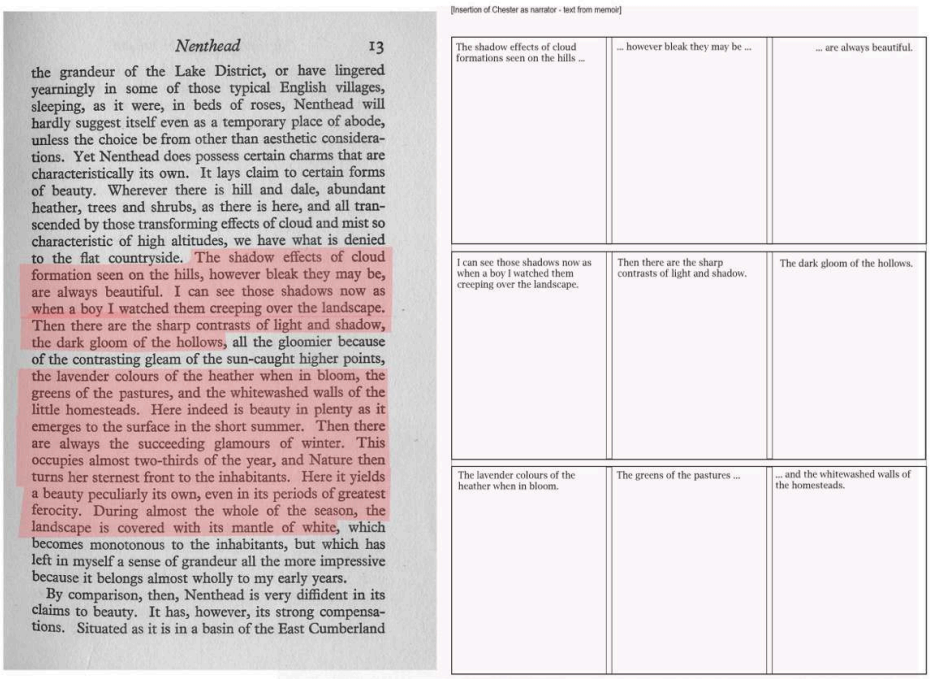

Figure 2. Nick Dodds, *The Checkweighman* (work in progress), page 16 showing verbal transposition from original source: *Pilgrimage from Nenthead* by Chester Armstrong (London: Methuen 1938), © Nick Dodds

26 In this case, the opening chapter of Chester's memoir covers the author's upbringing in the lead-mining community of Nenthead. The first few pages emphasise the remoteness and wildness of the East-Cumberland landscape, beguiling to the author "even in its periods of greatest ferocity" (Armstrong 13). This section is significant in that it provides a stark contrast to the constraining, industrial coal-mining environment that the Armstrong family will eventually move to. It is also important in understanding Chester's personality, his propensity for the poetic and his spiritual connection to the natural world. Looking back as an older man Chester is clearly groping for the words to give vent to the fulness of his boyhood experience. When describing the rural terrain around his hometown, the term "beauty" is repeated and reinforced throughout; there are "certain forms of beauty", there is "beauty in plenty", "a beauty peculiarly its own", the shadows of clouds on the hills are "always beautiful" (13). I have earmarked the two selected passages outlined in Figure 2 for inclusion in the graphic work because they contain particularly evocative yet succinct descriptions of the exterior world and capture the essence of the author's character and narrational style — reproduced here (with omitted lines indicated by strikethrough) for the purposes of legibility.

27 Extract 1: *Pilgrimage from Nenthead* page 13 (destination page 16 of adaptation)

> The shadow effects of cloud formation seen on the hills, however bleak they may be, are always beautiful. I can see those shadows now as when a boy I watched them creeping over the landscape. Then there are the sharp contrasts of light and shadow, the dark gloom of the hollows, all the gloomier because of the contrasting gleam of the sun-caught higher points, the lavender colours of the heather when in bloom, the greens of the pastures, and the whitewashed walls of the little homesteads.

28 Extract 2: *Pilgrimage from Nenthead* page 13 (destination page 17 of adaptation)

> Here indeed is beauty in plenty as it emerges to the surface in the short summer. Then there are always the succeeding glamours of winter. This occupies almost two-thirds of the year, and Nature then turns her sternest front to the inhabitants. Here it yields a beauty peculiarly its own, even in its periods of greatest ferocity. During almost the whole of the season, the landscape is covered with its mantle of white, which becomes monotonous to the inhabitants, but which has left in myself a sense of grandeur all the more impressive because it belongs almost wholly to my early years.

29 Next—whilst careful to retain the tone and phraseology of the original, as this is a key indicator of the narrator's viewpoint and the period in which Chester was writing, the selected body text is then lightly edited to either remove repetitive phrases or enable a neater fit when placed in panel formation. This has meant exercising control over the internal rhythm and placement of the textual narration. In essence, to locate the lyrical quality within the lines of prose and augment spatially on the page in a repositioned (poetic) form. The text is placed within a new grammatical construct, one delineated by panel frames and bounded by strip-ellipses, which function as pregnant moments and mini-cliffhangers in the story. The sentence which reads: "The shadow effects of cloud formations seen on the hills, however bleak they may be, are always beautiful" is given a renewed emphasis in the graphic adaptation by being moved to the top of the page, spread across three panels and the opening strip. In this instance, the rearrangement parallels the structure of the original line with the intended pauses (indicated by commas) used as panel-break points. The effect is to accentuate word combinations, to amplify the meaning in the text yet allow sufficient space for the panel-image to operate, to seek a balanced dynamic between the linguistic message and the image message. As can be seen in the layout in Figure 2, Chester's narration is positioned in the top fifth of each panel and is relatively evenly distributed so that it conforms to a regular beat. Overall, the intention here is to avoid word-heavy panel compositions which may cause the flow of image-content to 'seize-up' or require the reader to check unnecessarily and look instead to "exploit the visual specificity" of the form (Baetens 80).

Visualisation – creating the panel images

30 At this juncture, it is useful to briefly reprise the role of the image and the effect of visualisation on the process of subtraction and contraction between novel and comic-book. As some have pointed out, the employment of drawings often negates the need for lengthy "prose descriptions of characters, actions, and settings" (Tabachnick 10). Whereas drawn images are adept at summarising the detail of locations or character facial expressions and body language, they may be less suited at capturing interiority, the nuances of abstract thought or dealing with "verbal ambiguity" (Kukkonen 75). It is possible to view the illustrated image as a surrogate for the written text or hypothesise that its chief function is to distil the original source into a visual shorthand that leads to a reduction, not only in respect to the length of the comic-book format but also in narrative depth. As previously indicated however, I feel this underestimates the cognitive complexity of the panel-image and its transformative potential. The visual qualities of a comic-book remodel and extend the written text "by inventing visual metaphors and emphasizing similarities and parallels that in the original text remain(ed) underground" (Simonetti 378).

31 Fig. 3 continues the adaptive process shown in the previous illustration and shows a completed draft of page 16 of *The Checkweighman*, now with the inclusion of proto visuals. The monochrome panel-images have been pencilled by hand on A4 graph paper, then scanned into a computer software application and the text added separately. The opening chapter in the graphic adaptation covers Chester's upbringing in Nenthead and opens with a five-page "fly-over" sequence of the Cumberland moors, transposing from the wild, uncultivated landscape (via images of sporadic human inhabitation) towards the birthplace of the author/protagonist. This unifying sense of linearity and progression is interrupted by singular image-interjections (head portraits, hands, and domestic interiors) that herald other parts of the narrative. This is the second page in that sequence and the first to include any verbal content, as Chester's narration begins to assert a presence.

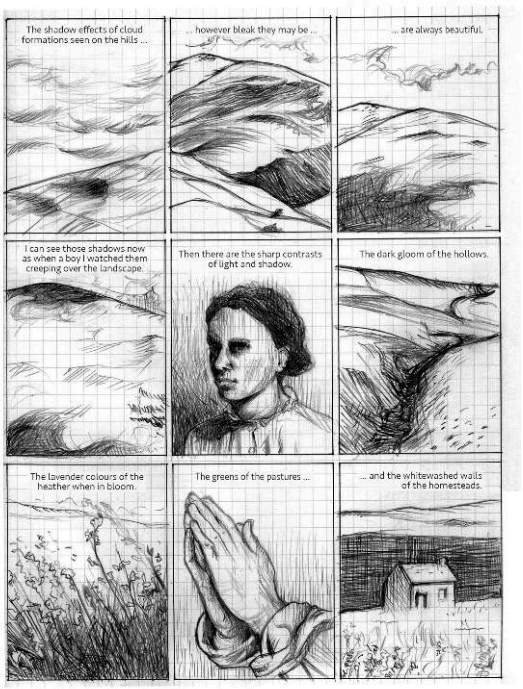

Figure 3. Nick Dodds, *The Checkweighman* (work in progress), page 16 visual roughs, © Nick Dodds

32 Pictorially, there are several points of interest here. As signposted earlier, the page schema seeks to exploit the plurivectorial functionality of the nine-panel/three-strip, assembling different ways for the reader to approach the design and process the narrative content. The preferred or primary reading of the page follows the customary directional flow of narrative (and verbal narration) starting with the first panel in the top-left corner then moving left to right through each strip in turn. However, the reader is encouraged to engage in the panel-chain that motions the story whilst simultaneously directing their attention towards the portrait at the page centre (in the fifth panel). The effect is accentuated by the depiction and pose of the woman in the panel-image (the first sighting of Chester's mother Elizabeth) who gazes out of frame, directly addressing the reader. The representational style within panels is intended as "realistic" so that the instances of human likeness and the fellside are intelligibly transcribed to the viewer. However, each panel-visual lacks the concentrated iconic

detail of a lens-based image. As a succession of drawn panels, each contains elements of abstraction which is evident in the simplification of forms, cropped viewpoints, areas of cross-hatching and directional mark-making that belies the artist's presence and the hand-motion of pencil across paper. Roland Barthes argues that all images, drawn or otherwise, "are polysemous; they imply a [...] 'floating-chain' of signifieds, the reader able to choose some and ignore others" (Barthes 1982, 39). Seen in isolation, each one of the opening four "moorland" panels can be read as ambiguous images. Their meaning depends on being recognized by the reader as constituent parts in a strip sequence (panels one to three form a coherent panel-chain that suggests panning across a landscape), and on complementary information supplied by the narrational text which serves to narrow the scope of possible readings.

33 At this point there are no visual cues to show who or where the words come from (although the reader can deduct that the unseen narrator is male from the reference to "as when a boy" in the fourth panel). The integration of text and image is made explicit by the lack of narrative 'boxes' so there is no outright separation between verbal and visual registers. Instead, the written text (with placeholder font) has been incorporated into the top of each panel-design and, for purposes of consistency and legibility, placed within negative spaces or areas of the image which have been left blank or where the drawing fades out. The intended effect is to encourage the reader to view the text and image holistically as one, so that the author identity of each separate part (at least at this juncture in the narrative) is left open to question. The repurposing of the original text may be seen as an overt act of appropriation, yet there is another motive which is perhaps more difficult to articulate because it pertains to the artistic and the psychological; that of attempting to empathise or enter into the mindscape of my great-grandfather in the imagining of the visuals.

34 The "relay" (38-41) or tension between the verbal track and the image track is a key attribute of the comic-book form, a dynamic that can be mobilised to probe the phenomenological and familial dimensions of the *Pilgrimage* project. McCloud identifies and classifies seven word/image types which present varying levels of autonomy or convergence in regard to the conveyance of meaning (McCloud 2002, 128-130). These include word-specific or picture-specific (where either text *or* image is the dominant mode of address), duo-specific (words and images amplify the exact same message), intersecting (words and images in sync yet supplying some additional context separately), interdependent (words and images combine to impart a meaning that neither could do singly), parallel (divergent or conflicting relations) and pictorial montage (of visual/textual elements). To a greater or lesser extent each "relay-model" requires deductive reasoning and empathic engagement by the reader in order to realise "the unity of message" and propel the narrative in a meaningful direction (Barthes 1982, 41).

35 Drawing upon McCloud's theorem, seven of the nine panels on page 2 would appear to be convergent in structure, either "intersecting" (panels one, six, seven and nine) or "interdependent" (panels two, three and four). There are two panels (five and seven) where visual and verbal tracks appear to diverge, or where image-content and narrational-text appear to be juxtaposed tangentially. In panel seven the first half of the line that reads "The green of the pastures ..." is coupled with an image of praying hands, conjuring up a range of possible readings; associations of religious community, the intertwining of spirituality and the landscape; or in relation to the main

protagonist, a portent of the inner struggle to come. Alternatively, seen in conjunction with adjoining panel-images, the seventh panel forms an "L" shaped sequence with the fifth (portrait) and ninth (homestead) panels inviting connotations of motherhood and gender. In the *Pilgrimage* memoir Chester writes tellingly of the heroism and sacrifice performed by women within the home yet is acutely aware of the pervading societal patriarchy. In reference to his mother Elizabeth, he writes:

> Once established in her own home, she became a large part of it. Centred here, she fell into her sphere of service with the same matter-of-fact inevitability as bespeaks the wives and mothers of the working classes everywhere. (Armstrong 31)

Closing remarks

36 In regard to the novelisation of *Pilgrimage from Nenthead* and my role as adapter, my motives are threefold: to pay tribute to a life-lived, to tell (and preserve) a story that is not widely known and ultimately to create an original comic-book that attempts to "work authentically" (Mantel 6) with the source text and my response to it.

37 The comic-book is an autonomous medium predicated on a "code" not found in other narrative forms which is tripartite in foundation because it merges three disciplines: design, drawing and literature. The foundational grid of the graphic page and arrangement of image/text content indicates formal structure and narrative order. However, as demonstrated here via a close analysis of the adaptive process and the work-in-hand, comics are "a form of reading that resists coherence" (Hatfield xiii). There is an inherent instability in the spatial and temporal elements of a comic-book and a fluidity between the tracking of visual and verbal narration that invites different ways of gathering the information necessary to follow the story, requiring active participation by the reader to affect closure. Moreover, comics are ideal for showing temporal dislocation or montage, as scenes from the past, present, and future can be spatially aligned on the same page. This encourages the reader to find meaning in their interrelationship, to consider the "complex bleedings of past and present [...] a blending that allows the present to be productively continuous with the past" (Gardner 18). To this end, comics are a versatile medium for adapting true-life tales, for probing the interstices between the exterior-world (of lived experience) and the interior-world (of the mind).

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ABSTRACTS

The term "adaptation" has a dual meaning and refers both to the process of re-creation within or across media forms, as well as the end product of transference. This paper addresses the creative challenges posed by the adaptation of a literary memoir into the uniquely codified, image-based vernacular of the comic-book. The structural design of a comic-book is predicated on a mathematical partitioning of the page and the arrangement of visuals and text into a panel grid. This indicates a predefined spatial order and sequence, yet paradoxically, the comic-strip is a narrative form that ultimately defies coherence. There is instability in the rendering of temporal cues and partial visualisation of scenes and settings, tension in the relay between image and text and ambiguity in the blank spaces between panels and in the page margins, requiring the reader to complete the hidden parts of the story in their imagination. This paper will argue that these attributes can be deployed by the graphic memoirist to deal meaningfully with the fragmentary nature of true-life memory and experience. This inquiry relates closely to *The Checkweighman* project, the graphic-novelisation of *Pilgrimage from Nenthead*, a memoir penned by the author's great-grandfather Chester Armstrong (published by Methuen in 1938). The adapted work presents both opportunity and limitation in regard to recasting Chester's interior and exterior worldview, a perspective fused by the socio-political landscape of late nineteenth century British life. The chief aim here is to investigate how the transportation from the literary mode to a predominantly visual mode reshapes the narrative, with particular focus on the mediating role of the graphic artist in the handling of real-life testimony and staying "true" to the tone and content of the original text. Critical and strategic approaches to adaptation and authentication will be examined, through the reflexive articulation of the ongoing adaptive process and formal analysis of proto-page artwork from the project in hand.

Le terme « adaptation » a une double signification et désigne à la fois le processus de recréation intra- et intermédial, et le produit final issu de ce transfert. Cet article porte sur les défis créatifs posés par l'adaptation de mémoires littéraires dans la langue codifiée, et fondée sur l'image, de la bande dessinée. La structuration d'une bande dessinée repose sur le découpage en cases de la page et sur la disposition des images et du texte dans une grille. Cela implique un ordre spatial et une séquence prédéfinis, mais paradoxalement, la bande dessinée est une forme narrative qui, au final, défie la cohérence. Il y a une instabilité dans le rendu des indices temporels et la visualisation partielle des scènes et des décors, une tension dans la relation entre l'image et le texte et une ambiguïté dans les espaces vides entre les cases et dans les marges de la page, ce qui oblige le lecteur à compléter grâce à son imagination les parties cachées de l'histoire. Cet article soutient que ces traits définitoires peuvent être déployés par l'auteur de mémoires graphiques pour traiter de la nature fragmentaire de la mémoire et de l'expérience de la vie réelle. Cette enquête est étroitement liée au projet *Checkweighman*, version graphique de *Pilgrimage from Nenthead*, mémoires écrits par l'arrière-grand-père de l'auteur, Chester Armstrong (publiés par Methuen en 1938). L'œuvre adaptée présente à la fois des possibilités et des limites pour représenter la vision intérieure et extérieure du monde de Chester, une perspective inscrite dans le paysage sociopolitique de la vie britannique de la fin du XIX^{e} siècle. L'objectif principal est ici d'étudier la manière dont le passage du mode littéraire à un mode principalement visuel

remodèle le récit, en mettant l'accent sur le rôle médiateur de l'artiste dans le traitement des témoignages de la vie réelle et en restant « fidèle » au ton et au contenu du texte d'origine. Des approches critiques et stratégiques autour de l'adaptation et de la quête d'authenticité (*authentication*) seront examinées, à travers l'articulation réflexive du processus d'adaptation et l'analyse formelle d'une maquette de proto-page du projet en cours.

INDEX

Mots-clés: adaptation, mémoires, bande dessinée, modalité visuelle, authenticité
Keywords: adaptation, memoir, comic-book, visual modality, authenticity

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Nick Dodds is an illustrator, researcher, and senior lecturer in visual culture at the University of Cumbria. Nick has a longstanding passion for narrative theory and visual storytelling which feeds directly into his own artwork and academic output. He has worked collaboratively on comic-strip themed projects with arts organisations across Cumbria, including the *Lakes International Comic Art Festival* in Kendal. Furthermore, as a songwriter and musician with the low-fi band *Pecker*, Nick has co-written and performed original soundtracks to a diverse range of films including *The Grandmother* (Lynch 1970) and *Man with a Movie Camera* (Vertov 1929). Nick is currently working on a PHD project at Northumbria University based around an exploration of the 'graphic memoir', a practice-based approach that intertwines personal, family, social and political history.