The Panel as Page and the Page as Panel: Uncle Shelby and the Case of the Twin ABZ Books

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I’m someone who grew up reading comics. With a few notable and some half-remembered exceptions, I didn’t begin reading what we tend to call “children’s literature”—picture books included—until I hit college and took a course in children’s literature led by Richard Flynn. I was the kind of kid who read comics: comic books, comic strips, collections of comic strips and one-panel gag comics. My ambrosia was anything with word balloons and panels, whether four-color or black and white, floppy or hardbound, Schulz or Kirby, digests of Beetle Bailey stolen from the PX bookstore or traded issues of Bronze Age Superman done up by Swanderson, that team so classic it’s known by a single name.1 Besides comics, if I really wanted to out myself, I suppose I’d have to add to my list various and sundry Dungeons and Dragons2 field guides (or whatever they were called)—a face-saving gesture, that parenthetical—I know full well what they’re called). Those and miscellaneous books of mythology and fairy tales. I preferred stories, as Randall Jarrell apparently did, set in “that world where / The children eat, and grow giant and good” (286), but mostly I dug those stories, to modify slightly Alice’s famous pronunciation, with pictures formed by thick black lines and conversations hovering above in a field of white.

Around the same time I took Richard Flynn’s children’s literature class at good old Georgia Southern University, I began reading what we like to call, tongue firmly in cheek, the “so-called LANGUAGE Poets.” This was in the mid-1990s. And these good poets and their queer, genre-bending books led me back in time to once-ignored but now somewhat fashionable Modernist masterpieces like Louis Zukofsky’s A, Gertrude Stein’s Tender Buttons, William Carlos Williams’s Spring and All, and Ezra Pound’s Cantos. Those, in turn, pointed my way to the historical avant-garde, a journey that took me past the

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Beats (whom I largely found tedious) and the giddily effervescent poetry of the New York School, a group of writers unafraid to extol the virtues of the comic books I so loved as a child.3

This bit of autobiography serves to explain how I came to be so uninterested in Aristotelian categories, with their necessary and sufficient properties. Many of the texts I read as a young man are marked by an active resistance to the Aristotelian model. The conceptual poem, the sound poem, the visual poem, the performance poem: they all stand on somewhat shaky ground, generically speaking. To illustrate, let’s turn to a musty old chestnut by Robert Frost—or at least a stanza of it. (And fear not: we’ll get back to comics shortly, picture books shortly thereafter.)

Whose woods these are I think I know.  
His house is in the village though;  
He will not see me stopping here  
To watch his woods fill up with snow. (224)

A more stable example of the twentieth-century lyric poem I can’t imagine, one that stands in stark contrast to the visual poems of Man Ray, the sound poems of Kurt Schwitters, the minimalist poems of Aram Saroyan, the computer poems of bpNichol, the conceptual poems of Christian Bök.

Now, consider Geof Huth’s little poem “jHegaf” (figure 1), or take a trio of poems from Chains, by Derek Beaulieu (figure 2), or even Arnold Adoff’s difficult-to-name poem from Slow Dance Heart Break Blues, which can be “read,” at least part of it, rather conventionally (figure 3) (maybe we could call it “He/ehS”?). All these texts are “poems,” but as a crew, there’s very little uniting them,
and had I added a couple of sound poems into the mix, there’d be even less. Yet all are poems, and there are theoretical as well as historical reasons for putting them all into the same category as Frost’s “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.” The theoretical reason emerges from George Lakoff’s notion of the radial category. According to Lakoff, at the center of every radial category lies a “typical case prototype.” The Frost poem (or something very close to it) is such a prototype: that is, the kind of thing that springs to mind when we ask of someone who’s not a feral child raised by wombats, “What does a poem look like?” (One might say, and I guess I am, that the less likely a work is to need some kind of marker—sound poetry, conceptual poetry, visual poetry, prose poetry, even experimental poetry—the closer you are to a typical case prototype.) From that typical case prototype, we radiate outward, although each of the previous examples may lie on a distinct radiant. Man Ray’s famous untitled poem suggests the typical case prototype, but undermines our expectations by avoiding language altogether. His poem looks like something Frost could have written—a typical, rectilinear poem—only one that has been redacted, each word (or, perhaps, phrase) run through with a censoring pen. So it participates in the typical case prototype in certain articulable ways, whereas the poems above by

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Beaulieu and Huth, though made of letters and punctuation marks, look very different from Frost’s, and thus resonate with the prototype in other articulable ways. Likewise, X. J. Kennedy’s poem “Concrete Cat,” which I discuss in Poetry’s Playground, exists somewhere between the poems of Adoff and Beaulieu, for it is made of letters and words but no sentences, its pieces cobbled together to create the image of a cat crouching near a dead mouse (signified by the word “mouse” printed upside down), a litter box (the word “litterbox” stacked atop a twin), and a food dish (simply “dishdish”) (98). As we radiate outward still, we come to texts that have very little in common with the typical case prototype, but they, too, are called “poems” because they’re written by poets, are included in poetry collections or anthologies, and have—this bit is crucial—elements in common with poems that do have elements in common with the typical case prototype (or elements in common with poems with elements in common with poems that have elements in common with the typical case prototype—you see what I’m getting at). However, the case eventually becomes harder and harder to make, and we reach texts so far from the typical case prototype that we only contentiously call them poems. Having radiated so far from the center, we reach texts that exist in a generic borderland, somewhere between, say, graphic design and poetry, or music and poetry, or philosophy and poetry, texts that could be called (I’m drawing on Dick Higgins here) “intermedial,” or experimental, or, lazily, “avant-garde.” (Lakoff would doubtlessly want me to remind you that the special language I’m using—“far,” for instance—is metaphoric: distance serving as a metaphor for dissimilarity, proximity for similarity.)

Another method for determining a text’s genre involves the consideration of extratextual and historical factors like those I mentioned a moment ago (where it appears—in a poetry anthology—and by whom it was written—a poet). Samuel Delany clearly articulates the historical considerations for situating a text in one genre or another in a review essay on Scott McCloud’s Understanding Comics, modestly titled “The Politics of Paraliterary Criticism.” In the essay, Delany pauses a moment to explain his intuitive description—not definition—of genre, one that, in its simplicity and directness, seems to answer the question at the heart of this symposium in one fairly long sentence:

[W]hat I mean when I use the term genre: I mean a collection of texts that are generally thought similar enough so that, largely through an unspecified combination of social forces (they are sold from the same bookshelves in bookstores, they are published by the same publishers, they are liked by the same readers, written by the same writers, share in a range of subject matters, etc.), most people will not require historical evidence to verify that a writer, producing one of those texts, has read others of the group written up to that date. (257)

So, turning (at last) my focus to the subject at hand, when we encounter Maurice Sendak’s In the Night Kitchen (to use an example both Philip Nel and Perry Nodelman point to), we know it’s a picture book influenced by comics—Winsor McCay’s in particular—not a comic book influenced by picture books. Conver-
sations accrete around works, and those conversations, part of the “unspecified combination of social forces” Delany refers to above, help characterize a work as part of one genre and not another. These conversations produce a kind of forward inertia: the more a work is thought of—engaged—as a member of one genre, the less likely it is to be thought of—engaged—as another.

To illustrate this constellation of points (and justify my earlier digression into the spiraling category of poetry), let’s consider Shel Silverstein, who, before his estellation as The US Children’s Poet, got his caliginous start as a minor cartoonist in the pages of Playboy, his reputation in the comic arts eclipsed by the brighter stars of Jack Cole, Will Elder, and Jules Feiffer. Despite Shel’s stellar reputation as a popular poet, Silverstein’s poetry is anything but great (for elaboration on this claim, see my Poetry International essay “‘The devil’s favorite pet’: The Poetry of Shel Silverstein”). Sketchy, improvisatory, seemingly dashed off and endlessly recycled, Silverstein’s poetry may not be great, but it is interesting, and what is so interesting about it is that it seems so simple and straightforward, so distinct from what we tend to label “great art,” while simultaneously being so difficult to pin down as any one kind of art (comics, the picture book, poetry, music, what have you). For instance, in Where the Sidewalk Ends, you’ll find Silverstein’s poem “Giraffe,” a piece constructed of hand-drawn letters (“Please / do not / make f / un of / me an / d pleas / e don’t / laugh / it isn’t / easy t / o writ / e a po / em on / the ne / ck of / a run / ning / gira / ffe”) arranged so as to resemble the mid-portion of a giraffe’s long neck (at the top and bottom he drew spots). The neck has no outline, only the border suggested by the initial and concluding letters in each “line.” Obviously, this poem cannot be split from its illustration: they are one and the same.

Most of Silverstein’s poetry participates in the Edward Lear-esque “illustrated poem” prototype (with its clear line between text and illustration), but “Giraffe” complicates the text/illustration binary, hewing more closely to the calligrammes of Guillaume Apollinaire. However, Silverstein is known for a third kind of poetry, one more akin to the one-panel gag comic than to the conventional illustrated poem, the page serving as the panel, the poem a kind of elaborated caption in rhymed, accentual verse. In fact, before the “Giraffe” poem referenced above was included in Where the Sidewalk Ends, it was part of a series of cartoons Shel wrote for Playboy in 1965, Uncle Shelby’s Kiddy Corner. That version of the poem, aside from color, has no nonlinguistic elements: the “head,” missing in the Sidewalk version, is formed by the word “Poem” (a jokey play on a title). This giraffe calligramme appears among more conventional cartoon panels like “Children,” a single-panel gag cartoon with accompanying verse. There, between the title and the verse (all hand lettered and colored), is the image of a large stew pot, with two heads—belonging to kids, I suppose—peeking over the vessel’s rim.

Shel’s intermedial impulse has been evident since the early sixties, when he began exploring alternatives to the one-panel gag comic and began mixing genres in his work for Playboy: for example, his travelogues and Teevee Jeebies,
his rhymed bestiaries and adulterated children’s literature. Shel’s travelogues, reprinted in Silverstein Around the World, offer a kind of generic salmagundi, featuring the essay, photojournalism, the one-panel gag comic, even the epistle (Playboy cast Shel as a kind of gonzo cartoonist/correspondent, reporting his far-flung adventures back to the magazine’s Chicago offices by post). Our engagement with his travelogues is determined by how we position each piece generically: we can excerpt a gag comic and read it as a single, self-contained cartoon, for example, or see the panel as one part of an entire page, or one piece of one page out of an entire, multipage work.

In 1996, Silverstein contributed the comic strip “New St. Nick” to the Christmas issue of Playboy. “New St. Nick” collides the poem with the panel, producing a kind of multipanel illustrated poem/cartoon akin to yet crucially different from the illustrated poems found in his children’s collections. Dig, if you will, a picture: two double-page spreads, each page containing three long panels organized pictorially by an ever-changing St. Nick on the right and an antagonist (of a sort) on the left, urging him to change. The space between the characters is filled with a typeset stanza of light verse. Each stanza is a “triplet” (a tercet rhyming AAA) concluding with the refrain, “So he did.” Quoting two lines should be legal (the first line, which I’ve omitted, concludes “ol’ Saint Nick”):

In “New St. Nick” Silverstein blends the comic strip with light verse, arriving at something quite different from the illustrated poems found in his poetry collections: the narrative elements of his verse work alongside the narrative elements we expect from comics (in panel A, this happens, then in panel B, something new happens, each new panel taking us forward in time). Yet the work also suggests the picture book: his estate might note how well each panel works as a page—they are longer than they are wide, after all. Break this baby up into a series of single-panel pages and, voila! we have a made-to-order, holiday-themed picture book by our dear Uncle Shelby!

This juxtaposition of verse and drawn panel is not unusual in comics. As a child, I read many issues of The Savage Sword of Conan (Marvel, 1974–95) that included poems about our rugged Cimmerian juxtaposed with page-sized panels depicting the action described in the verse—pieces undeniably “comics,” for both the theoretical and historical reasons outlined above, but which, in some other package, might pass for a picture book of some kind (or that much maligned genre: the fantasy calendar). The full-page panel is not a recent innovation in comic books, although the artist focus of the 1990s Image movement—Todd McFarlane among the most popular artists therein—certainly popularized the one-page panel (without, generally, accompanying verse).

But Silverstein’s oeuvre has one piece in particular that serves best to illustrate the slipperiness of genre distinction: the provocative Uncle Shelby’s ABZ Book.
The work exists in pure comic form and in pure picture book form, the former first appearing in the pages of *Playboy* as a comic riff on the children's picture book, and the latter published as a kind of parody of the children's alphabet book, a quite common subgenre of the picture book. What you see here (figure 4) is my inexpert rendering of the basic layout of the two double-page spreads that make up the comic strip version of the *ABZ Book* (the panel marked “H” is important to our discussion: keep it in mind).

As you can see, although the content suggests the children's alphabet book, the look suggests, as Nodelman puts it in his contribution to this section, the “mosaic intricacy” of the comics page (438). The strip’s narrative, about an evilly avuncular author who dislikes children, is solely metafictional (unless one counts as “narrative” the journey from A to . . . well, whatever letter Shelby’s alphabet ends on. And I probably would). Still, what we have here is a minor point relating to the contributions by Nodelman and Nel, which suggest that narrative is a crucial element to both comics and picture books. Yes, it is a common one, so common perhaps that its absence becomes a kind of presence, as such an absence would insist that readers reflect on it. Yet, as Michael Joseph suggests in this symposium, picture books and comics often (re)assert their materiality and interactivity in gleefully ludic ways that are aloof to or cast doubt on narrative itself. Their playful assertion of book form need not be tied to storytelling. In Lakoff’s terms, narrative is a *prototypical* element but not at all crucial, as I believe these final two examples demonstrate.

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In the comic version of ABZ, one reads across the spread (marked “gutter” in my drawing), so each row is six panels long. In the context of *Playboy*, the comic is unambiguously *satire*, or *parody*: this is a comic strip *using* the children's abecedarian as a platform for humor (as *In the Night Kitchen* uses the comic strip to further its aims as a picture book). However, as I’ve argued elsewhere (see my “Speculative Account”), once these panels are broken up into *pages* and a cover is added, including on the back a photo of the artist and an author bio, our reception to the work changes: the work becomes a picture book, and in this case, one whose audience is unsettled—so unsettled, in fact, that later editions have *warnings* stressing that the book is *not for children* (despite the fact that it so evidently is for children; otherwise, why have the warnings?). Here (figure 5) is a rough approximation of the “H is for Hole” panel I marked above (without the jokey prose text, which, in summary, notes how deep and big the hole is, how many objects can be buried in the hole—a toaster, grandma’s teeth, car keys, things like that—and, in the end, teases that one could bury a tattling little sister in the hole as well).

![Figure 5.](image)

It’s funny enough, sure, but once the panel is turned into a page—in fact a double-page spread (figure 6)—a different visual joke or pun becomes evident, one that, if I may be so bold to suggest, just plain doesn’t exist in the comic form, as it depends on the nature of the book itself to exist. Isolated as a panel, the answer to the question “What else can you bury in the hole” seems to be “your little sister,” but, curiously enough, in the form of a children’s picture book, the nature of the question and its potential answer shifts: no longer are we talking about a hole you can dig, but another kind of fissure entirely, and the image
of the hole—like the classic optical illusion of the duck and rabbit—becomes an image of the sort of thing you might bury in such a hole, a rather dirty joke absent in the pages of Playboy (where, one would think, the joke would be more at home) but obvious here. The “grassy” lines there on either side of the egress, a superfluous detail in the comic, become essential in the picture book.

This rather blue observation brings me to the end of my allotted space, but I have a hundred or so words left to me with which I can make a concluding gesture: Delany’s characterization of genre is an important one, as is Lakoff’s notion of the radial category. Rather than drawing up lists of this and that quality of comics, of picture books, of what-have-you, including this text in our generic kingdom but exiling that, we’d be better served, as would any text to which we turn our attention, by asking how the text is read by its community of readers and thinking about how it might be read differently, asking what happens to a comic when we read it like a picture book, what happens to a picture book when it’s read like a comic. I submit that this set of questions is exactly the kind Silverstein asked when he decided to rework his comic strip version of the ABZ Book into a picture book, paratextual details and all. However, we need not redraw and republish a work to perform this kind of readerly alchemy. All we need is the drive to do so. And the imagination to pull it off.
Special thanks to Arnold Adoff, Derek Beaulieu, and Geof Huth for the immediacy with which they granted me permission to reproduce their work in this essay, free of charge. Although seemingly a small thing, their permission reflects each poet’s commitment to the free and rigorous discussion of art and culture. I encourage my readers to seek out their work and support it.

Notes

1. For the uninitiated, *Swanderson* refers to the legendary team of Superman artists, Murphy Anderson (inks) and Curt Swan (pencils), who are largely responsible for the look and tone of Superman throughout the “Bronze Age” at DC, the publisher that owns the character. The Bronze Age roughly encompasses the years 1970 to about 1985, when the twelve-issue “maxi-series” *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (1985–86) radically reimagined the DC Universe.

2. It’s only been in the writing of this essay that I’ve realized just how influential the whole D&d thing has been on me. The texts that constitute the corpus of D&D (or AD&D or whatever it’s called these days) are writerly in the most direct and unambiguous sense, if by writerly we mean what I think Roland Barthes means by the term: a kind of text that encourages a special sort of productive relationship between reader and writing; for a writerly text, at least in the articulation found in Barthes’s S/Z, is ourselves writing, before the infinite play of the world (the world as function) is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system (Ideology, Genus, Criticism) which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages. (5; original emphasis)

So the writerly text, like those produced for D&D—even allowing the “rules,” which are so often broken, bent, or reimagined improvisationally as context and intuition demand—encourages its reader to become “no longer a consumer, but a producer of text” (4). Furthermore, the books comprising the game are also heteroglossic, written as they are by multiple, collaborating authors and including expository prose, graphic narrative, and ersatz-medieval poetry. They feature visual art, comics—both strips and (believe it or not) one-panel gag cartoons—and draw on mythological systems from around the world; they are rooted in classical Greek and Roman drama, poetry, and history, the demonological and ceremonial grimoires of Aleister Crowley and organizations like the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, medieval Romance and Arthurian legends, fairy tale and fable, and much more besides. It was my love of D&D that led me to J. R. R. Tolkien, about whom I ended up writing my MA thesis (under the able direction of Richard Flynn, who’s also to blame for my incipient interest in the LANGUAGE poets); and it was Tolkien who led me in turn to the Icelandic Sagas, the two Eddas, medieval poetry, Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Hesiod’s *Theogony*, the *Argonautica* of Apollonius of Rhodes, and (again again) much more besides. Oddly enough, Tolkien—with his multigenre works, world-building (invented languages and all), fictional histories and historiography, his copious appendixes blending the academic essay, quoted poetry, and epic history all brought together for larger, aesthetic aims—also prepared me for the genre-bending work of the LANGUAGE poets and the digressive footnotes of Dave Wallace, and gave me the patience necessary to wend my way through the long, dense work of postmodern greats like Pynchon and Barthelme.
And the world of *D&D* (alongside Tolkien, who even more than Gary Gygax is *D&D*’s papa), with its handbooks and supplementary tomes and fluid narrative structures, resonated perfectly with the continuity-obsessed milieu of the superhero comic (and, incidentally, the academic discourse to which Tolkien contributed at his day job, a job we now have in common).

3. With a little poking around you can find Frank O’Hara’s collaborations with Joe Brainard, particularly their delightfully subversive queer cowboy comics (“Red Rydler and Dog”). Also of note, Kenneth Koch’s “comics mainly without pictures” (collected in *The Art of the Possible*, published by Soft Skull Press).

4. For a clear yet thorough discussion of radial categories, check out the first chapter of Lakoff’s *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think* (1996). *Moral Politics* has an excellent reference section that will point you to his linguistics work on the subject.

5. I haven’t reproduced the poem here because of prohibitively high permission fees, so I’ll give you a feel for what Man Ray’s poem looks like by writing my own variation. The poem begins with a title and a tercet (all redacted), something along the lines of this:

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The poem continues in this vein, the tercet followed by a pair of five-line stanzas and a concluding quatrain. For a look at the actual poem (and to reassure yourself that a poem without words or letters could be called a poem by a respected scholar), I recommend Willard Bohn’s indispensable *The Dada Market: An Anthology of Poetry*, where you’ll find a host of poems parsecs from the typical case prototype embodied by that supermassive star of a poem, “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.”

6. Legally, then, I would suggest that the letters I typed up earlier in this paragraph are not the poem: the poem exists primarily in the visual rendering of those letters: the shape they take as individually inscribed images and the general impression those letters give when taken together, which is that of a giraffe.

7. I would show you these poems, dear reader, but the Silverstein estate has forbidden me to reproduce either images (in the case of the “Giraffe” poems) or verse (including the twelve-word, three-line poem “Children”). Of course, in the form letter refusing permission, the estate’s representation—the aptly named Solheim (wait for it) Billing (I’m not making this up) and Grimmer (truth, as they say, is stranger than fiction)—does not mention fair use (hoping, I’d imagine, that academic presses have forgotten about this useful yet under-used feature of our nation’s intellectual property law*). As a result, my essay will be somewhat less effective from this point on, for instead of simply reproducing the visual works by Silverstein I discuss, I find myself limited to either linguistic description or my own crude approximation of Silverstein’s already crude drawings. Let me stress: while I can’t afford to reproduce the Man Ray visual poem I gestured to earlier, I have been absolutely forbidden to quote or reproduce any images or poems by Silverstein. The Silverstein estate flat-out refuses to grant permission, a refusal that appears to be a matter of course, creating a kind of censorship by prior restraint, chilling (but not quite killing) the rigorous discussion of Silverstein’s
undeniably important contributions to our culture. I’d quote the grim but rather concise response to my query for permission, but I wouldn’t want to come across as petty. My suggestion? If you’d like to see the Silverstein works I discuss, find yourself a big box chain bookstore and steal yourself a copy of the books in which they appear. Or pirate a digital version from an online torrent site. (I kid. I kid.)

* For a discussion of our ever-shrinking cultural commons and the troubled history of intellectual property, see Louis Hyde’s timely *Common as Air: Revolution, Art, and Ownership*. I also recommend Ian Hamilton’s *Keepers of the Flame: Literary Estates and the Rise of Biography* for a thorough and rather depressing look at the negative effect literary estates can have on both the reputation of deceased writers and our understanding and appreciation of their work.