Literary Impressionism and Chris Ware’s Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth (2000) by Paul Williams

Many critics and reviewers have hailed the comics of Chris Ware as a form of modernist cultural practice, with comparisons being made to canonical modernist writers such as James Joyce, Franz Kafka, William Faulkner, Samuel Beckett, John Dos Passos and Gertrude Stein.[1] As Kuhlman and Ball have pointed out (x, xviii), critics have repeatedly identified Ware’s affinities with modernism: his theory of impersonality (Sattler), his use of repetition and interrupted narratives (Goldberg), the themes of alienation and commodity culture in his work (Prager), the interaction between memory and circularity (Bartual) and the presence of a modernistic, melancholic masculinity in the anthologies edited by Ware (Worden, ‘Shameful’; see also Worden, ‘Modernism’s Ruins’). This essay extends the modernist framework that has previously been used to analyse Ware’s work, with a specific focus on the Civil War battle scene in Ware’s Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth (2000).

[2] I will relate this scene’s formal features to a group of writers who are sometimes placed under the sign of modernism, albeit as an early outpost: the literary impressionists of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.[3] Tamar Katz summarises as follows:

[Proponents of literary impressionism] voiced the idea that existing conventions of representation were inadequate to capture the world’s complexity[,] [I]Impressionist fiction delivered this critique by suggesting a rift between conventions of realist representation and the subject’s perceptions, as well as between realist conventions and the simultaneity of the object world. […] In thus focusing modernist fiction on the perceptual processes of the subject, impressionism draws attention to the problematic nature of subjectivity. (5) [4]

By reading Ware’s work in relation to these concerns, and making connections to writers such as Joseph Conrad and Stephen Crane, I hope these brief notes will show some of the impressionistic impulses in Jimmy Corrigan.

However! I’ve got two reservations about this approach, so I want to be careful if I’m going to pursue such connections. The first note of caution is that, while the tendency to relate Ware to modernism has produced some terrific and intelligent insights into his work (as the above references indicate), on some occasions constructing Ware as a comic-book modernist seems tied up with the habit of fitting comics into established hierarchies of cultural value in order for them to appear credible and worth commenting on. To take Peter Schjeldahl’s 2005 article on graphic novels:

[Graphic novels are a young person’s art, demanding and rewarding mental flexibility and nervous stamina. […] The difficulty of graphic novels limits their potential audience […] but that is not a debility; rather, it gives them the opalescent sheen of avant-gardism. Avant-gardes are always cults of difficulty—Cubism, ‘The Waste Land’—]

After making this point, Schjeldahl emphasises the ‘difficulty’ that runs through the art of Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, the poetry of T. S. Eliot, and the comics of Chris Ware. Why? To encapsulate a moment in which, to quote the article’s subtitle, ‘Graphic Novels Come of Age’. Schjeldahl’s article appeared in The New Yorker, so ( unlike most of the pieces mentioned above) he’s not writing in a peer-reviewed academic journal or edited collection – but then, neither am I. As I continue this hybrid of academic article and blog, it’s worth asking (if only to myself) whether tracing affinities between Chris Ware and literary impressionism risks inviting in that unwanted dinner guest, the “Comics Grow Up!” cliché.

Before I provide an answer to that query, the work of other Ware scholars prompts a second note of caution in my head, and another question: what is Ware’s attitude towards modernism? This is discussed in a thought-provoking chapter by Marc Singer in the edited collection The Comics of Chris Ware: Drawing is a Way of Thinking (2010). Writing about the comics anthologies that Ware has edited, Singer reads him as positioning alternative comics between the crass commercialism of the superhero genre and the pretension and abstraction of modern art. Quoting from Ware’s introduction to The Best American Comics 2007, Singer writes that in ‘Ware’s telling, modernism and its successors “all but stomped out the idea of storytelling in pictures,”’ (36) and Ware’s friend Dave Eggers points out ‘Ware looks fondly back to a time before modernism crushed almost all of...
literary figures. These comparisons can enhance our understanding of Ware’s command of technique and the hesitation, there are gains as well as dangers in tracing similarities between comic creators and canonical admiration for the culture of the very early twentieth century. (8) Going back to the question raised by my first themes and content: significant portions of the narrative are set in the 1890s and Ware has expressed his psychological verisimilitude. Further, an interpretative framework of literary impressionism fits comics make on readers, but in terms of his attempt to engage formally with sensation, memory and seeming lack of craft in some forms of conceptual art, in this essay I’ll be emphasising literary impressionism as Bearing in mind, then, that Ware’s resistance to modernism is more like a resistance to the pretentiousness and successors. Ware’s greatest mockery is reserved for those artists who sideline technical skill and elevate bare satire is the disproportionate amount of attention that critics and curators invest in Duchamp’s derivative earliest pieces. In addition, Ware’s suspicion is not towards Duchamp himself. Rather, the object of Ware’s American art establishment (its histories, exhibitions and teaching institutions) in the century after Duchamp’s to summarise that Ware’s objection is to the empire of abstract, non-representational art that extended over the industry. Appropriately enough, given Ware’s experience with the tutors at the Art Institute of Chicago, a ludicrous, leering art teacher [5] in The ACME Novelty Library #17 illustrates Ware’s ‘distaste for contemporary art’ (Roeder 74). Given the teacher’s pretentious mimicry of Marcel Duchamp, the avant-garde artist famous for turning everyday objects into art exhibits, it seems fair to see this character as a way of satirising the conceptual art that Duchamp pioneered and inspired (Roeder 66-69). [6]

The above paragraph should explain my wariness about reading Ware’s comics in light of literary impressionism, a cultural movement with modernist shadings. But let’s not close the laptop and get back to marking just yet. While the concept ‘modernism’ arches over literature, painting, sculpture, dance, photography and filmmaking (and so on), Singer, Eggers, Beaty and Roeder all seem to be using the term specifically in relation to the visual arts. Where literary modernism is concerned, Ware seems more receptive, and last year he chose Joyce’s Ulysses (1922) as his favourite book (Greenstreet). [7] Furthermore, I’m not sure how fully we can establish Ware’s resistance to modernist visual art, since Cubist painter Pablo Picasso provides one of the epigraphs to Ware’s Building Stories (2012), a ‘graphic novel’ composed of fourteen comics in a box. Is Ware even that opposed to Duchamp’s conceptual provocations? He cited the avant-garde artist’s ‘Museum in a Box’ as an inspiration for Building Stories (Kaneko and Molly).

Faced with these apparent contradictions, an obvious conclusion would be that “modernism” is being deployed in varying ways to construct different constellations of creative practice. Because the term has this slippery meaning, when Ware, his friends and his critics refer to his hostility towards modernism it can be difficult to ascertain which type of modernism is causing the problem. Drawing on Singer, Roeder and Beaty, it seems fair to summarise that Ware’s objection is to the empire of abstract, non-representational art that extended over the American art establishment (its histories, exhibitions and teaching institutions) in the century after Duchamp’s earliest pieces. In addition, Ware’s suspicion is not towards Duchamp himself. Rather, the object of Ware’s satire is the disproportionate amount of attention that critics and curators invest in Duchamp’s derivative successors. Ware’s greatest mockery is reserved for those artists who sideline technical skill and elevate bare appropriation (of images and of prefabricated objects) into an art-form.

Bearing in mind, then, that Ware’s resistance to modernism is more like a resistance to the pretentiousness and seeming lack of craft in some forms of conceptual art, in this essay I’ll be emphasising literary impressionism as a way to address Ware’s comics. It gives us a way of talking about Ware’s experimentation, the demands his comics make on readers, but in terms of his attempt to engage formally with sensation, memory and psychological verisimilitude. Further, an interpretative framework of literary impressionism fits Jimmy Corrigan’s themes and content: significant portions of the narrative are set in the 1890s and Ware has expressed his admiration for the culture of the very early twentieth century. [8] Going back to the question raised by my first hesitation, there are gains as well as dangers in tracing similarities between comic creators and canonical literary figures. These comparisons can enhance our understanding of Ware’s command of technique and the ethical implications of his formal play. They don’t have to be the fealty that must be paid to write about comics; they can give us additional ways of reading and enjoying Ware’s comics, and Jimmy Corrigan specifically.
The sequence I am going to analyse is on pages 100 and 101 of *Jimmy Corrigan* (fig. 1 and fig. 2).[9] The layout and content of the panels on pages 99 and 102 (woodland scenes featuring a red and white bird) 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. As we read page 100 it takes a little while to realise it is the 1860s and we are watching an episode from the American Civil War (1861-65) – the last panel in which we were anchored in a specific time and place was on page 98, when we knew it was the 1980s and we were in Waukosha, Michigan.

The first human presence in this scene is in panel three of page 100. The first panel on the page is a smaller and differently coloured version of the first panel on page 99, with a cursive caption that finishes the sentences begun in the previous panel: ‘A chill morning in April / moist with the scent of settling peach blossoms.’ Ware’s language (touching on the temperature, the moisture in the air and the smell of peach blossom) and the soft, changing colours of pages 99-100 (evoking the meandering light of daybreak) bear out the immersive intentions that Conrad declared for his fiction in 1897. Conrad wrote that if fiction’s appeal to temperament is to be
Ware is working in words and images, not just 'written words', so there's a limit to the applicability of this quotation, but I trust the general point stands: the slow pace and Ware's 'appeal through the senses' accumulates into a multidimensional impression of the American countryside rising from sleep.

The second panel on page 100 is an overhead view of leaves lying on the ground and the third is identical — except for a human hand sitting on top of the fallen foliage. Given the bucolic impression up to that point, the sudden apparition of the hand, appearing without comment, speed-lines or flowing blood, has the surprising effect of a cinematic jump-cut. But readers who have followed the plot so far may not be too disturbed by its appearance, since it echoes an earlier moment when William Corrigan gave his son James a hand broken off a statue at the 1893 World Columbian Exposition (where William is working as a glazier). So maybe the hand on page 100 is another piece of statuary? The potential horror of the severed body part is not enforced by the following panel, the last in the row, which is cheerfully alliterative. This fourth panel introduces 'A Party of freshly breakfasted bookbinders, barbers and bottlemakers'. However, as the eye tracks down and left to the first panel on the second row, we are unambiguously in the throes of war: this party of small businessmen is revealed to be a company of soldiers being 'blown to pieces.' There is no attention-grabbing punctuation or hysterical exclamations, only a "Waresque" deadpan delivery. The understated appearance of the hand, uncommented on as the progression of panels moves on to herald the party of small businessmen, invites readers to double-take; when panel five on page 100 is read, retrospective awareness makes the status of the hand legible. This is no statue.

Let's see a more elaborate instance of the retrospective reading process. There are two time periods interwoven in this scene, the April morning in which the fighting is taking place and three panels interrupting the temporal and spatial unity of the battle scene. These three panels depict a dimly-lit pair of trees with two animals beneath, clearly at night with rain coming down. With a little effort we can connect the trees in the two time zones and be confident this is the same geographical location, but at a different moment in time. Eagle-eyed readers might identify the two animals illuminated by a flash of lightning as pigs. But as we read through (for the first time) we have to entertain a suspended closure of meaning, we have to hope that the relation between parts will be revealed — and it is, on the verso of the page. Before we turn over, the cursive narration tells us 'Only one unlucky hero will be left to see / by the light of a midnight thunderstorm', and it concludes on page 101 'the chewed-up bits of his company / swollen and split in the rain / and fed upon by hogs / freed from the surrounding farms.' Now the import of those three panels is clear, and the rhythm of the build-up maximises the horror and the slow, grim realisation of what fighting and dying in the Civil War entails. To borrow a term from Conrad scholar Ian Watt, this is delayed decoding — an image is first offered in an indirect manner, perhaps half-seen, or only perceived through a sound-effect — but the incident is revealed in fuller detail retrospectively (270).[10]

Certainly, Ware is using another literary technique to make the reader work that little bit harder. But it's not stylist for the sake of stylist. This technique speaks to the trauma of the 'unlucky hero' watching as his fallen comrades provide a macabre night-time dinner for the escaped hogs. Perhaps the images of battle are the projection of the 'unlucky hero' who cannot break out of the trauma inflicted during the fighting, a soldier compelled to repeat the violence inside his head. As Roberto Bartual has written of Ware's comics, 'memory can [...] produce a state of paralysis [that] frequently makes us go against our survival instincts, neutralising our power of action and becoming dwellers of our own remembrances.' (66) In relation to pages 100-01 of Jimmy Corrigan, the present has not been permanently banished, since the three panels show the midnight thunderstorm breaking into the inner world of the unlucky hero, but this intermittent intervention of the present does not decisively interrupt the repetition of the fighting. Thinking about verb tenses, the future perfect of 'one unlucky hero will be left to see' grammatically suggests that the hogs have yet to start eating the dead soldiers, even though the reader has already seen the porcine feast. The violence has already subsided, since we have seen the pigs on page 100 and the aftermath of the battle on page 101, and the cursive narration has told us what will happen to the bodies of the fallen, but it is still going on in the mind of the company's sole survivor, someone yet to move psychologically into the present. That present flickers on the edge of consciousness, and leaves its mark like the afterimage of a lightning strike, but is kept at bay (the last panel on page 101 appears to take place after the fighting but before nightfall). The surviving soldier may be William Corrigan, who tells his son that he lost the middle finger on his right hand capturing a Confederate soldier during the battle of Shiloh, where 3,744 men were killed. In the last panel of page 100 the 'unlucky hero' shoots the same finger off, in order to be invalided out of further combat. This figure seems to be the last member of the company left alive, in the right-hand corner of page 101. Pages 100-101 are set in April, the same month that the battle of Shiloh took place.

[11] I would argue that the cursive narration not only reflects William Corrigan's psychological shock, it conveys the way he reshapes the story of his missing finger in front of his son (and presumably others too). The new identity that William narrates for himself is one of noble self-sacrifice, turning himself into an 'unlucky hero'.

Ware's choice of language puts me in mind of the narrator of Henry James's novella Daisy Miller (1879), whose description of the young man Winterbourne invites readers to be sceptical of his character and conduct, even though the words are superficially diplomatic: 'when certain persons spoke of him they affirmed that the reason of his spending so much time at Geneva was that he was extremely devoted to a lady who lived there—a foreign lady—a person older than himself.' (8-9) 'Extremely devoted' indeed; 'unlucky hero' indeed.

Still, if Ware gives us the subtle clues to see through William Corrigan's deception, he is compassionate about the conditions that led him to shoot off a finger. Ware's portrayal of military conflict embodies why the American
Civil War was so shocking and traumatising for the soldiers who experienced it. Brought up on a diet of weekly British war comics in the 1980s, there’s something eerily detached about this battle scene for me. It breaks with several conventions of Anglophone war comics, since there are neither speed lines to indicate flying bullets nor words written outside speech balloons to signify explosions. Abandoning these techniques conveys the speed of the fighting and its psychological trauma. The American Civil War pioneered new technologies of mass killing, notably the use of machine guns (Ellis). On Ware’s pages the soldiers are depicted as simply coming apart; the wave of bullets is so complete that it would be meaningless to depict individual projectiles. This chimes with the depiction of warfare in Stephen Crane’s Civil War novel *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), which also declines to iterate the continual presence of bullets in the air. They are assumed to be there and they constitute the medium which the soldiers inhabit. This is a lethal ambient environment but, in an era of automated weapons, the presence of gunfire is so constant it has formed the unremarkable texture of war. In addition to the cursive narration adding information to the scene, a second layer of prose narration is added as an exegesis to the unfolding events. This second layer of narration describes the absent sounds of the battle, but places them within the thought balloons of the combatants. This gives the impression the soldiers perceive the noise of the war as something emanating from inside their heads. Once more we appear to see combatants retreating into a psychological interior to escape the violence, but the cacophony of modern war has entered that solipsistic world with them. Psychologically as well as physically, we are seeing the barriers of the self ruptured amidst the bloodshed of the American Civil War.

Earlier, we saw Chris Ware saying that modernism and its successors ‘all but stomped out the idea of storytelling in pictures’ (qtd. in Singer 36). The scene just analysed requires patience and dexterous reading, but the challenges it presents abide by Ware’s impulse to tell a story in pictures. For these reasons, literary impressionism strikes me as an appropriate reference point for this episode in *Jimmy Corrigan*: as a cultural movement, literary impressionism was an augur for interwar modernism, but its practitioners are far more grounded in the narrative structures and formal expectations of nineteenth-century popular genres than the more experimental and conceptually driven texts of the modernist canon (see Fagg). I like the above reading, and I think we’ve gained some insights into Ware’s comic by way of this literary comparison, but I’ve only mentioned a handful of pages. Does the comparison work for the rest of *Jimmy Corrigan*? Does it work for other comics by Chris Ware? Does it affect our reading of the Paul Cezanne poster in the hospital waiting room in *Jimmy Corrigan*, seeing as Cezanne exhibited paintings with the Impressionists but is generally thought of as a Post-Impressionist? I’ll be interested to see what others think…

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[1] – See Ezard; Goldberg; Kidd; Nissen; Ware, ‘Comicbook Master’.

[2] – Where texts have been serialised and then published later in one volume, dates given are for the first collected edition.

[3] – Literary impressionism refers to a group of writers who were biographically linked, but their coherence as a movement was loose and only stressed by some of its members late in the day. Max Saunders’s entry in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography puts the focus on Henry James, Ford Madox Ford, Joseph Conrad and Stephen Crane, but other literary impressionists are available. Notable twenty-first-century works of criticism include Tamar Katz’s Impressionist Subjects: Gender, Interiority, and Modernist Fiction in England (2000), John
[4] – I’ve used Katz’s summary here as a shorthand for my thinking about literary impressionism, but pinning the term down has proved difficult for well over a century. Parkes argues that the term “impressionism” may be slippery, confusing, and contradictory, but such untidiness was intrinsic to the role it played in modernist aesthetics and in the literary and cultural battles of its time. Literary impressionism was partly about this problem of definition.’ (10)

[5] – As Roeder comments, there is a degree of self-mockery in calling the teacher ‘Mr Ware’ (66). She notes the Mr Ware character is used to lampoon pop artist Roy Lichtenstein (66), and Bart Beaty comments ‘pop art has become the primary locus of ressentiment for cartoonists. Thus, in an untitled strip published in the back of the Uninked catalogue (2007), which he edited, Chris Ware depicts his disdain for the art world generally by focusing on pop art specifically.’ (55)

[6] – Roeder records further instances of Ware deriding the thoughtlessness of Duchamp’s readymades (74).

[7] – Ware named Leo Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina (1878) as well as Ulysses.

[8] – ‘I just prefer the craftsmanship and care and humility of design and artifacts [sic] from the earlier era. […] There seems to be a sort of dignity to the way we were creating the world a hundred years ago’ (Ware, ‘Comicbook Master’).

[9] – I have determined pagination for this scene by counting back from the two pages (206-07) in the comic which are given numbers.

[10] – To take an example from Conrad’s novella Heart of Darkness (1902), where delayed decoding gives added impact to Conrad’s critique of the inhuman and racist regime running the Belgian Congo: ‘A slight clinking behind me made me turn my head. Six black men advanced in a file, toiling up the path. They walked erect and slow, balancing small baskets full of earth on their heads, and the clink kept time with their footsteps. Black rags were wound round their loins, and the short ends behind wagged to and fro like tails. I could see every rib, the joints of their limbs were like knots in a rope; each had an iron collar on his neck, and all were connected together with a chain whose bights swung between them, rhythmically clinking.’ (33)

[11] – Shawn Gilmore also reads the fighting as the battle of Shiloh (151).

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ook from Chicago author Chris Ware is a pleasantly-decorated view at a lonely and emotionally-impaired “everyman” (Jimmy Corrigan, the Smartest Kid on Earth), who is provided, at age 36, the opportunity to meet his father for the first time. An improvisatory romance which gingerly departs itself between 1890’s Chicago and 1980’s small town Michigan, the reader is helped along by thousands of colored illustrations and diagrams, which, when read rapidly in sequence, provide a convincing illusion of life and movement. The bulk of the work is supported by fold-out instructions. Chris Ware’s graphic novel Jimmy Corrigan: the Smartest Kid on Earth relates the stories of two central protagonists: Jimmy Corrigan, leaving Chicago to meet his father in Waukosha, Michigan, for Thanksgiving in the 1980s, and James Reed Corrigan, growing up in Chicago in the 1890s and abandoned at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition. However, the novel’s narrative content is also shaped by a paratextual framework of prose and images, labeled, respectively, “General Instructions” and “Corrigenda,” through which we can better understand the interrelation between novel’s main plotlines and the graphic narrative system that Jimmy Corrigan employs. In what follows, I analyze how these non-narrative pages inform the novel’s narrative structure and.