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Spirituality and Comics in Hugo Pratt, Alan Moore, and David B.: Esotericism as "Unsettled Knowledge"*

Francesco Piraino**
Center for the Study of World Religions - Harvard Divinity School

This article describes the artistic production and intellectual and spiritual life of three of the most important artists in the field of comics and graphic novels: Hugo Pratt, Alan Moore, and David B. These artists share a common interest in esotericism: they have participated in esoteric and alternative spirituality groups, and in their artistic works they reproduce esoteric symbols, narratives, and doctrines. Scholars in religious studies have already described the connections between contemporary art and esotericism, arguing that artists are "spiritual seekers" who represent their spiritual quest. This article goes beyond such a perspective by describing how esotericism has changed in contemporary societies and, in particular, within the frame of comics and graphic novels. Esotericism is generally understood as a "rejected", "absolute", and "stigmatised" form of knowledge, characterised by elitism and secrecy. The esotericism of these artists (both in their life and in their artworks) is not "rejected"; on the contrary, it has become mainstream, with best-seller publications and museum exhibitions. Furthermore, it is not "absolute" or "hidden"; rather, it reveals doubt and deconstructs religion and spirituality, sometimes even challenging or mocking them. For these artists, esotericism is a form of "unsettled knowledge", a never-ending quest for transcendence and a means of learning about the unconscious and humankind. It finds its legitimisation in religious texts, revelations, and religious movements, but mainly in the power of storytelling. This article argues that the blurring between reality and narration does not imply a process of disenchantment, nor a "hyper-religion", instead representing another form of spirituality in contemporary societies. Finally, this "unsettled knowledge" is also unsettling for the reader, who is challenged by these artworks and finds in them wondrous, dazzling, and dreamlike experiences.

Key words: popular culture; comics; spirituality; esotericism; Hugo Pratt; Alan Moore; David B.

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** francesco.piraino@cini.it

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Introduction: Esotericism(s), Occulture, and Comics

In this introduction, I will discuss the main definitions of esotericism. The putative father of contemporary esoteric studies is Antoine Faivre (1934–2021), who contributed to reshaping a marginal and stigmatised field in Western academia. Faivre proposed a broad definition of esotericism: a set of currents that have strong similarities and are historically connected, such as Kabbalah, Neoplatonism, Magic, and Rosicrucianism. These currents are characterised by specific "forms of thought", such as correspondence, living nature, imagination, and mediation, and the experience of transmission (Faivre, 1986). Wouter Hanegraaff shifted the focus from esoteric forms to how esoteric knowledge has been constructed and perceived in historiography. He argued that esotericism represents a wastebasket category of knowledge, excluded by the Enlightenment and by both Catholic and Protestant Churches: a "rejected knowledge" (Hanegraaff, 2012). Michael Barkun made a similar argument, asserting that esotericism is a superseded, forgotten, and stigmatised form of knowledge in religion (2003). Other scholars, such as Kocku von Stuckrad and Hugh Urban, offered a different approach, regarding esotericism as a religious discourse, which implies social, cultural, and political outcomes. Esotericism as a form of "absolute knowledge" is hidden, secret, and aristocratic (von Stuckrad, 2008) and can produce elitist politics and sectarianism (Urban, 1997; Piraino, 2019).

With the category "occulture", Christopher Partridge described the diffusion of esoteric and occult ideas, symbols, and narratives in mass cultural production, starting from the countercultural movement of the 1960s. Occulture is a paradigm shift in contemporary Western societies, an expression of the intertwined processes of sacralisation and secularisation. Furthermore, occulture normalises esotericism, which is no longer a secret or absolute knowledge, having become just "ordinary". Occulture is part of late capitalism, another good to consume (Partridge, 2014). Adam Possamai proposed a similar analysis, arguing that esoteric knowledge in contemporary Western societies has become a "McDonaldised Occult culture" (Possamai, 2002, p. 48), a "hyper-religion" with its political and religious values discarded, implying a process of disenchantment.

Nina Kokkinen (2013) developed the category of occulture as an analytical tool, suggesting that it could also be applied in the 19th century and highlighting the process of "religioning" carried out by artists. This artistic exploration of spirituality should not be considered "inauthentic" or "superficial", because artists participate in shaping religion (Kokkinen, 2013, p. 22). Kokkinen's main theoretical frame is the "seekership" or the "new age discourse" (Sutcliffe, 2003), which explains how believers in contemporary societies—and artists, in particular—undertake a spiritual quest characterised by syncretism and anti-dogmatism, focused on personal well-being. For artists and for "spiritual seekers", the self is the ultimate authority and can question institutional religions (Kokkinen, 2021).

In the last twenty years, the literature on comics and religion has grown steadily. Scholars have described how comic artists participate in shaping religious phenomena, thereby innovating in the comics medium (Kraemer and Lewis, 2015; Lewis and Kraemer, 2010) and

how comics represent and misrepresent religions (Lund, 2016). Furthermore, according to Jeffrey Kripal, comics and popular culture are the place for theological innovations and will play a crucial role in the future of religious phenomena. Kripal argued that American popular culture is suffused with mystical mythemes, and "pop-cultural products" are often the results of "private paranormal experiences" (Kripal, 2011, p. 2). In this article, I will not limit my arguments to detecting esoteric narratives in comics, as has been done for the works of Alan Moore (Hanegraaff, 2016) and Grant Morrison (Granholm, 2014). Rather, aligned with Kripal, I will show how comics are a place for religious innovations. I will argue that the main conceptualisations of esotericisms employed by Faivre, Hanegraaff, and von Stuckrad are not effective in describing the esoteric comics of Hugo Pratt, Alan Moore, and David B. Esotericism as "forms of thought" could be applied to comics, but this would not capture their specificity, since this model is too generic and could be applied to very heterogeneous phenomena, thus losing its heuristic force. Esotericism as "stigmatised" or "rejected" knowledge would not apply to a mass medium, such as comics. In fact, what has been stigmatised by contemporary science or institutional religions has been affirmed, by many contemporary artists. In addition, the esotericism of these artists is the opposite of "absolute". It is the display of doubt, wonder, apprehension, and exploration. Finally, I will show that it is not elitist or secret since anyone who can afford a comic book has access to this esotericism.

In my opinion, the category of "occulture" aptly describes the field of art and esotericism, in which we find very different phenomena, in the work of Jorge Luis Borges and Federico Fellini, for example, but also in second-rate movies, books, and comics. Occulture artworks might be masterpieces destined to shape culture and society for decades, or entertaining products to be forgotten in a few months. Furthermore, occulture artworks could be the product of spiritual seekers, who consider art to be a spiritual practice (as argued by Kokkinen), but they could also be the product of "non-seekers", who use esotericism merely as a narrative device. The same could be said of readers, who can read/consume an artistic product with either secular or religious lenses/appetites. Considering the heterogeneous nature of the occulture category, I prefer to think of it as a heterogeneous field, a symbolic space (Bourdieu 1989) composed of different phenomena, rather than as an analytical tool. Furthermore, I will show that the focus on seekership does not capture the specificity of comics and graphic novels nor the social and political dimensions in the artwork of Pratt, Moore, and David B.

To overcome these theoretical dead ends, I propose the idea of esotericism as "unsettled and unsettling knowledge". This form of knowledge is anti-dogmatic and syncretic, not limiting itself to a specific religious or cultural context, but finding its main legitimisation in storytelling and spiritual experience. This "unsettled knowledge" blurs the boundaries of reality and fiction, and it questions, challenges, and sometimes even mocks religions. However, it should not be considered secular, but rather as the display of doubt and endless research. The protagonists of these comics are antiheroes tormented by their uncertainties about what is right and what is wrong, what is real and what is not. The focus of this

"unsettled knowledge" is transcendence, but also humankind, as an exploration of the unconscious and of societies and politics. Finally, this "unsettled knowledge" is also "unsettling" for the reader, who finds, in the boundless worlds depicted by these authors, a space for dazzling, wondrous, and metaphysical and psychological explorations, which lead them to question their own assumptions of reality.

Hugo Pratt

Hugo Pratt was born in Rimini in Italy in 1927, but he grew up in Venice, where his cosmopolitan family lived. His grandparents had French-English and Jewish-Turkish origins. With the exception of his anarchist uncle Ruggero, Pratt's family was Fascist. His grandfather was a leading figure of the Fascist party in Venice and his father, Rolando Pratt, decided to move his family to Ethiopia following the colonial venture. As Pratt wrote, "We were imperialist in order to become bourgeois" (Pratt and Petitfaux, 2022, p. 42). But the colonial and Fascist dream was shattered by the African experience. A teenage Pratt discovered the violence and absurdity of Italian racism. Furthermore, Italy was defeated, and Pratt's family were imprisoned, his father dying a transfer between internment camps. Despite the family's tragedy and the shattering of its Fascist ideals, the young Pratt made his way through the troublesome war period. In several interviews, he narrated how he learnt English, French, and Amharic, working as a handyman in brothels and, later, as a translator. Pratt also learnt to appreciate Ethiopian culture, religion, and language, understanding the fallacy of the supposed superiority of Western civilisation. For example, he understood the superiority of traditional Ethiopic medicine to scientific Western medicine in treating his painful burrowing fleas (Pratt, 2020), thus literally experiencing it in his own flesh. In 1943, Pratt came back to Venice with his mother, where at 16 he participated for a few months in the Fascist Italian Social Republic. He then worked in Venice as a translator for American and British troops and as a promoter of gatherings and concerts.

At the end of the war, Pratt started working in the emerging Italian comics and illustration sector. He participated in the Venetian "Uragano Comics" group. But he flourished artistically and professionally in Buenos Aires, Argentina, where he lived for thirteen years, working with established comics publishers and with renowned writers, such as Héctor Oesterheld. In 1967, Pratt returned to Venice, where he published *La ballata del mare salato* (*The Ballad of the Salty Sea)*, in which he introduced the sailor Corto Maltese (Fig. 1), a character who changed Pratt's life and the history of comics (Pratt, 1967). But he was not an instant success. Pratt moved to Paris, where Corto's adventures were more appreciated and better paid by the Communist publisher PIF. Over the years, Pratt's artwork became more and more popular until its consecration with two major exhibitions, in Venice in 1985 and in Paris in 1986 at the Grand Palais. In the same year, the French minister Jack Lang awarded Pratt the honorific title of *Chevalier des arts et des lettres*. This public recognition was a turning

point not only for Pratt, but for comics art, which was accorded the same dignity as other artistic languages.

Fig. 1 © Hugo Pratt, Watercolour of “Corto Maltese”, 1976

In 1983, Pratt retired to a small village on Lake Geneva, where he died in 1995. He, like Corto himself, had lived an adventurous life, with many voyages all over the world. He had played jazz with Dizzy Gillespie in Argentina, had shared experiences with Native Americans in Brazil, with anti-colonial forces in Angola, with Communists and anarchists, but also with former Fascists, Nazis, and Ustashas who had fled to Argentina. He fathered six children with four different wives, including a Native American in the Brazilian Amazonia, where he spent one year in the 1960s.

Pratt, like Corto, was a romantic adventurer who embraced life and humankind in all its forms and contradictions. Pratt epitomised Terence’s aphorism: “*Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto*”—“I am human and nothing human is alien to me”. The only thing that Pratt refused was middle-class moral conformism (Pratt and Petitfaux, 2022). As Corto stated: “I’m not one to judge, only I know that I have a genetic aversion to censors and arbitrators

[*probiviri*, Latin in original]. But, above all, those who I despise the most are the redeemers" (Pratt, 1985).

Pratt was deeply influenced by the comics of Milton Caniff and Héctor Oesterheld and by the literature of Joseph Conrad, Herman Melville, Rudyard Kipling, and Jack London (Barbieri, 2009; Cristante, 2017). A key figure of Pratt's artistic production is the adventurer: elegant, charming, permanently drifting, never at home and always helping outcasts and underdogs. Corto Maltese, Luca Zane, El Muerto, and Sargent Kirk are but a few incarnations of this archetype (Cristante, 2017). The adventurer refuses the conformist distinction between good and evil, and challenges social, religious, and political institutions. Some have even described Corto as an antihero, a "disenchanted" nihilist who gave up on everything (Battaglia, 2017, p. 172). I disagree with this interpretation; in fact, Corto can sound cynical, but he does not back away from the "good" battles. He honours friendship and love, and he shows compassion even to defeated enemies (Affuso, 2013). While there are several battle scenes in Pratt's comics, his message is anti-military and pacifist, condemning violence. "The war destroyed my family; how could I love it? [During the war years] I never felt exaltation", commented Pratt (Pratt and Petitfaux, 2022, p. 271).

Corto Maltese, as the prototype of the stranger and adventurer, is always helping subalterns, without being patronising. He helps revolutionaries in Ireland, Ethiopia, and New Guinea (Cristante, 2017). Pratt's anthropological curiosity about alterity started in his childhood when he was put in a class of children with disabilities for six months, where he learnt to appreciate diversity. Furthermore, his experiences in Ethiopia, Argentina, Brazil, and Angola forced him to negotiate with several cultures, languages, religions, and classes. Pratt's comics could be described as a form of post-colonial literature *ante-litteram* (Affuso, 2013). His characters question the supposed moral and intellectual superiority of Western civilisations and every form of colonialism. This is particularly noteworthy if we consider the historical period, the 1960s, when colonialism was still a taboo subject in Europe. Furthermore, Pratt depicted subaltern characters, giving them a voice, and thus a subjectivity, a key element of post-colonialism (Bhabha, 2012). The most important example is Cush (Fig. 2), a Black Muslim rebel, who shares in some battles with Corto (Pratt, 1972). Cush is deeply religious and committed to his revolutionary cause, which contrasts with Corto's eternal wandering. Having said that, Cush is not just Corto Maltese's sparring partner, but a resolute co-protagonist. Cush had significant success in Africa, where he represented the first positive Black character in comics. Hence, Pratt was invited as an honoured guest by the president Agostinho Neto to liberated Angola, where he gave drawing classes in 1978. Having said that, in Pratt's comics we can also find stereotypes of Black people, or surreal dialogue where Papuan rebels speak in Venetian dialect (1967). Hence, we should be careful in considering Pratt as post-colonial, especially according to today's sensibilities.

Fig. 2 © Hugo Pratt, Watercolour of “Cush”, 1978

The quest of Pratt and Corto is never ending, and the journey is always more important than the destination. For example, when Corto invites Rasputin to embark on another adventure, Rasputin replies,

A labyrinth in a rebus with an enigma for a solution? Yes, why not, it could be beautiful if there is the hope of finding the same old treasure… but even if we wouldn’t find anything… it’s the arcane, the mystery, the ambiguity, the sphynx, the allegory, the charade… What counts is the symbol, the play, the adventure (Pratt, 1982).

In Pratt's poetics, no one takes himself/herself too seriously. Pratt touches on crucial questions about life, death, politics, and religion, but there is always a sense of playfulness and mockery. Corto is often defeated in his treasure hunt and love quest, but he does not seem overly concerned, as in the case of the beautiful Chinese character, Shanghai Lil, who betrays Corto, snatching the Russian treasure from him and giving it to the needy (Pratt, 1982). Corto's bravado and disdain could also be ascribed to Pratt. For example, in the aftermath of the liberation of Venice in 1945, described by Pratt as a "huge carnival", he created his own uniform, "the individual soldier, who fights only for himself" (Pratt and Petitfaux 2022, p. 85).

This playfulness and disengagement have been key elements of Pratt's poetics. In the 1970s, a historical period of social and political activism, he was accused of being childish and useless. Pratt embraced these charges, taking on the "desire to be useless", the title of his main interview/biography (Pratt and Petitfaux, 2022). But this is just one layer of Pratt's art and poetics, which, as we have seen, helped question colonialism. Furthermore, the playfulness and disdain for material life opens onto another dimension, "what might be" (Affuso, 2013, p. 152): a metaphysical and esoteric realm. As Cush says to Corto after saving his life, "Those who play with life, as you do, are foolish… And the fools are sacred in Allah's eyes" (Pratt, 1972).

Pratt's religious education was heterogeneous. On one hand, his parents did not practice Catholicism or Judaism and were openly critical of institutional religions. On the other, Pratt's father Rolando was a Freemason, a Rosicrucian, and his mother Evelina Genero passed some of her interest in Kabbalah down to her son, an interest that was part of her family background. In Argentina, Pratt experimented with hallucinogenic mushrooms, which helped him "go back to his deep self" (Pratt and Petitfaux, 2022, p. 232). In Brazil, he frequented Candomblé syncretic and ecstatic rituals. Back in Venice, in 1976, he became affiliated with the Freemason Hermes Lodge of the Grand Lodge of Italy, one of the A.F.A.M., Ancient Free and Accepted Masons (Prunetti, 2013) depicted in the book *Fable of Venice* (Pratt, 1977).

Pratt represented esoteric practices and doctrines in several artworks. To name just a few examples: the I-Ching and Shamanism (Pratt, 1982), the Holy Grail (Pratt, 1987), Sufism and Yazidism (Pratt, 1982; 1985), and Christian, Jewish, and Islamic esotericisms (Pratt, 1977). Pratt admitted that his work was just a tiny fragment of the esoteric world. With his art, he wished to awaken curiosity in his readers, so they could embark on a new (esoteric) journey.

Drawing on different sources, the esoteric quests of Pratt and Corto are not bound by religious and cultural frontiers. Like many "spiritual seekers", Pratt questioned religious institutions, preferring heterodox and marginalised movements, and gave priority to his freedom and judgment (Kokkinen, 2021; Piraino, 2020; Sutcliffe, 2003). Corto mocked and defied deities in Atlantis (Pratt, 1992), such as the devil and death itself (Pratt, 1987), but he also mocked the same Masonic lodge with which Pratt was affiliated (Pratt, 1977). For example, when a Venetian Freemason asks Corto if he is one of them, he replies, "No, no,

I hope to be merely a free sailor", and later dismisses any religious commitment, saying, "I don't believe in dogmas or flags" (Pratt, 1977). Pratt's spirituality is quintessentially modern, perfectly epitomising the intricate process of sacralisation and secularisation, as a "modern pilgrim" (Hervieu-Léger, 1999).

Fig.3 © Hugo Pratt, "La Favola di Venezia", 1976

Pratt's transcendence remains elusive, incomplete, and out of reach. His religion is the research. "I'm researching the truth, but I know I will never completely reach it" (Pratt and Petitfaux, 2022, p. 255). In the comics universe, Corto explains to the pious Muslim Cush that he is not an infidel; rather, he belongs to the Cainites, a religious movement which is still seeking the lost paradise. Similarly, another character, Robinson, is condemned by the shaman-demon Shamael to pursue "the quest of the unattainable"(Pratt, 1979).

In Pratt's interviews and artworks, we can find several spiritual and esoteric ideas. Pratt believed that reality has a clear, decipherable side, but also a hidden world (Pratt and Petitfaux, 2022, p. 224). Furthermore, he considered human life to be connected to the universe: "My life began well before my birth, and, I think, will continue without me for a very

long time" (Pratt and Petitfaux, 2022, p. 171). According to Pratt, all his various spiritual experiences, which could be considered irreconcilable, are characterised by "*l'inquiétude*", or unsettledness (Pratt and Petitfaux, 2022, p. 237). Hence, Pratt never described (nor probably achieved) a coherent religious doctrine, a cosmology, or absolute knowledge; his, in fact, was an "unsettled knowledge". Granted, there are common themes in his artistic production, such as the importance of individual freedom, playfulness, harmony, love, and self-knowledge. For example, in a discussion between Corto and Hipazia on magic, she argues,

> Magic? Do you believe in magic? Ah, Corto, true magic is love and harmony. But what love and what harmony? The love for the eternal beauty and the harmony that embraces the universe. The more a soul is big and deep, the more time it takes to know itself. Achieving self-knowledge, without any shadows, is the most important magic of all (Pratt, 1977).

Pratt's esoteric quest was both transcendent and immanent. His esoteric practices were aimed at "[living] better to live better with others" (Pratt and Petitfaux, 2022, p. 237), which implies that spirituality and esotericism are not reduced to the realm of navel-gazing individualism—they concern humankind as a whole. For example, when an interviewer asked Pratt about the existence of God, he replied,

> For me that turns the problem upside down. I do not wonder about God, but about men. Hence my interest in myths, through which men try to understand, to give meaning to their situation in the universe. My passion for the myths about our origins undoubtedly reflects a metaphysical mindset, but one that is expressed through the human being. I do not question myself on the problem of God, but of Man, and I believe in Man. I want to call "God" the vital force, the evolutionary principle of the universe, but I could not believe in the god that each of the great monotheistic religions offers us (Pratt and Petitfaux, 2022, p. 254).

What has been said about Pratt's "unsettled spirituality" can also be grasped in his drawings and writing techniques. Pratt's adventures blur reality with dreams, marvels, and nostalgia (Zanotti, 1996). The clouded overlap between dreams and reality can be found in several publications (Pratt 1972; 1977; 1985; 1987; 1992). Pratt himself wrote, "My opinion is that real life is a dream" (Pratt and Petitfaux, 2022, p. 21). As Umberto Eco noted, these drawings are indefinite and blurred. Corto Maltese does not age over time (twenty-nine publications over twenty-four years); he is "angelised", growing younger and younger (Eco, 1996, p. 19). Furthermore, we can also find a playfulness in how Pratt often breaks down the fourth wall, presenting his characters as in a theatre play and questioning their existence. Corto, for example, at the end of *The Fable of Venice*, says, "It's better not to investigate [reality] too much; I might discover that I'm made of the same material as dreams" (Pratt, 1977). Finally, as has been argued by Cristante (2017), Pratt seeks to involve readers, for whom his musings raise questions.

Alan Moore

Alan Moore was born in Northampton in England in 1953 to a working-class family. The young Moore was fascinated by comics, which taught him the "basics of morality" (Parkin, 2013, p. 23). At seventeen, he was expelled from school for dealing LSD, but this episode did not hinder his education. Moore was an autodidact who studied art, history, and politics. Moore's artistic career started in the London underground scene, where he worked for the journal *2000AD*. Moore realised that he was a better writer than illustrator, so he decided to focus on writing screenplays for comic artists.

In 1983, Moore started working for DC comics, a main actor in the comic entertainment industry that had reinvented American comics (Millidge, 2011). In his long and fruitful career, Moore was able to work with small publishers and daring fringe projects (Moore and Gebbie, 2018) all while creating cult comics, which led to several successful movie adaptations in Hollywood (Moore and Gibbons, 1986–1987; Moore and Lloyd, 1992–1995; Moore and Campbell, 1989–1996). Moore is not only a screenplay writer; since the 1990s he has also written novels and performed with the band "The Moon and Serpent Grand Egyptian Theatre of Marvels" (Millidge, 2011; Parkin, 2013). Moore has received several prizes for his comics, such as the Hugo, Locus, and Time Magazine awards, and the Bram Stoker award. Furthermore, he has become a "counterculture legend" (Millidge, 2011, p.11), depicted in an episode of *The Simpsons* (Season 19, episode 7). His artistic creations cross the boundaries of the comics world. For example, the Guy Fawkes mask in *V for Vendetta* (Moore and Lloyd, 1982–1995) became the symbol of the Occupy Wall Street movement and of the activist and hacktivist network Anonymous (Fig. 4).

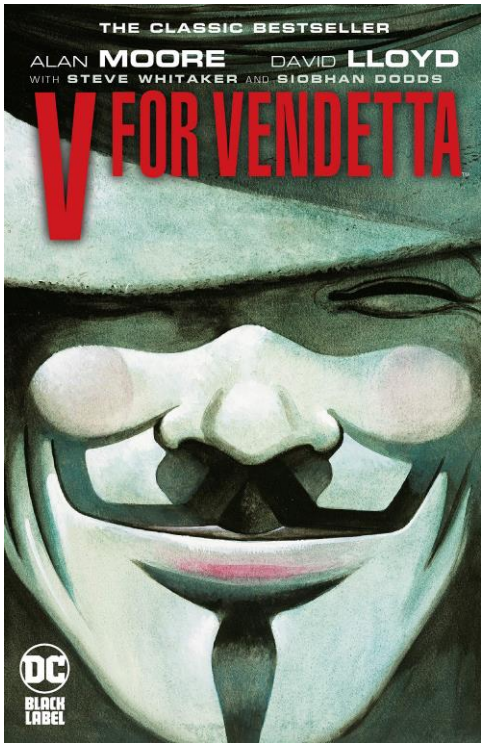

Fig. 4 © Moore and Lloyd, *V for Vendetta* book cover, 1992–1995

Alan Moore's revolution challenged the comics genre, showing the humanity and inhumanity of superheroes. Moore loves to display the good and evil in each character to represent the fragility of humankind, on both the individual-psychological and social-political levels. For example, in *V for Vendetta*, Moore depicts some Fascist-like characters as family men. He did not want to characterise them as monsters, but as persons, also highlighting the banality of evil. "I wanted to present some of the fascists as being ordinary, and in some instances even likeable, human beings" (Moore in Parkin, 2013, p. 90). By contrast, the good characters are depicted with their doubts and blemishes; they have to make difficult choices, sometimes unsettling their positive values. Today, the deconstruction of superhero morality has become a cliché. Most superheroes in comics and movies are dysfunctional, violent, and narcissistic. According to Moore, this deconstruction has been pushed too far, creating "nihilist" comics, a "dark ages of comic books" (Moore in Parkin, 2013, p. 185). Moore does not want to blur the frontiers of morality, to argue that "nothing matters"; rather, he wants to do the opposite. In the political period of Thatcherism in the 1980s, Moore wanted to challenge moral and political conformism, to provoke thought, to question the reader's assumptions on good and evil.

> Although the artwork was very black-and-white, with no shades of gray, I thought that one of the most interesting things about the story itself was that morally there was nothing but grey. We were asking the reader to consider some interesting questions (Moore in Millidge, 2011, p. 87).

One of the most important, recurring themes in Moore's poetics is the deconstruction of power and its contradictions. Throughout his career, Moore has engaged with ecology, feminism, LGBTQ rights, Islamophobia, racism, abuse of power, Fascism, and neo-liberalism. While Moore's comics are often dark, violent, and grim visions of dystopias, there is also a bright side, a possible counter-utopia (Carney, 2006) centred on the reader, who is asked not to follow another superhero "whose viewpoint is the right viewpoint" (Moore in Millidge, 2011, p. 132), but to understand for him/her-self what is right.

> [W]e are all responsible. The world is far more complex than our political systems sometimes would make us believe . . . The last line of Watchmen, "I leave it entirely in your hands", was directed at the reader more than Seymour. The fate of the world is undecided: everyone has reasonability. What the reader does in the next ten minutes is as important as everything Ronald Regan does . . . We wanted the reader to make the decision (Moore in Berlatsky, 2011, p. 48).

Moore's dialectic of utopias and dystopias challenges our definitions of good and evil: "To find light, don't ascend, but descend, find the sacred in the profane, hope in hopelessness, redemption in darkness" (Moore in Carney, 2006, p. 67). Moore's utopias are not strictly secular. On the contrary, they demand an ontological leap, a new consciousness of reality. To change politics, we also have to change our perception of the universe, which brings us to the esoteric dimension.

Moore's altered-state experiences started with the use of LSD in his teenage years. He understood that "reality was not a fixed thing" (Moore in Parkin, 2013, p. 39, 42). Later, he

used mushrooms and hashish, but his spiritual quest came full circle around his fortieth birthday in 1993, when he announced to his family and friends his new magic and esoteric journey. Together with another comics artist—Steve Moore—and with the help of psilocybin mushrooms, Alan Moore practiced rituals evoking spirits and metaphysical entities. During these rituals, he was contacted by the Roman deity Glycon, a snake god with a wig, who became his metaphysical guide (Fig. 5). Glycon, literally "the sweet one", was worshipped by a second-century religious movement founded by Alexander of Abonoteichus. What we know of it comes from Lucian's condemnation, describing this movement as a fraud concocted to steal money from gullible people (Millidge, 2011). Despite this unflattering legacy, Moore was not discouraged from following Glycon; on the contrary, he regarded these allegations as proving his point: spirituality is not a matter of authenticity, but of performance.

> To me, I think that's perfect. If I'm gonna have a god, I prefer it to be a complete hoax, because I'm not likely to start believing that a glove puppet created the universe or anything dangerous like that. To me, the idea of the god is the god. It doesn't matter what form it takes . . . Glyconism . . . there's only me and I'm not looking for members (Moore in Parkin, 2013, pp. 276, 300).

Fig. 5 © Alan Moore, *Glycon*, 1994

Moore is not looking for a religious identity, community, or coherent doctrine, but instead for a truthful religious experience. According to him, Glycon could perfectly well be a hoax, but the archetype of the snake cannot; in fact, it is "a symbol that runs through almost every magical system, every religion" (Moore in Parkin, 2013, p. 276). The criterion of truth is experience itself, its consequences, and its possible insights into the mundane, ordinary, and artistic dimensions (Fr. I.T.A., 2019). This pragmatic approach to spiritual experience shares several elements with the new age discourse, understood as scattered knowledge across various traditions, centring on the spiritual seeker and suggesting the advent of a new spiritual era (Piraino, 2020; Sutcliffe, 2003). Furthermore, Moore challenges institutional religions which

> corrupted one of the purest, most powerful and sustaining things in the human condition. It has imposed a middle management, not only in our politics, in our finances, but in our spirituality as well . . . Magic is closer to anarchism (Moore in Berlatsky, 2011, p. 94).

That being said, the new age discourse cannot be our only analytical frame. We need to dig deeper into the relationship between esotericism and art. According to Moore, religious and esoteric symbols are the independent expression of a collective unconscious. As argued by the character William Gull aka Jack the Ripper in *From Hell* (Moore and Campbell, 1989–1996): "Their language [of the symbols] speaks directly to our unconscious mind". "Symbols have POWER, Netley… Power enough to turn even a stomach such as yours . . . the one place Gods inarguably exist is in our minds where they are real beyond arguing, in all their grandeur and monstrosity.

The performativity of religion and spirituality does not imply a secularised understanding of reality. Moore believes that there is another ontological dimension, which cannot be reduced to our material world. In fact, according to Moore, "by accepting the idea of endless pantheons of gods, I somehow accept these creatures as being distinct and separate from me, and not as being, to some degree, higher functions of me" (Moore in Berlatsky, 2011, p. 85).

Moore's ontology implies the blurring between art and magical experience, which both offer another perspective of reality, entailing loss of "a sense of self" (Moore in Parkin, 2013, p. 277). Art, like magic, allows a better understanding of the universe, humankind, and society, but at the same time, this conscious shifting is dangerous. "Going bonkers" is the "occupational hazard" of artists and magicians (Moore in Parkin, 2013, p. 277). Moore pushes the similarity between art and magic to its extreme consequences. For him, language is reality, and mastering language means constructing and understanding the world. Art, religion, and language are the same object.

> Art is, like magic, the science of manipulating symbols, words, or images, to achieve changes in consciousness . . . Indeed, to cast a spell is simply to spell, to manipulate words, to change people's

> consciousness, and this is why I believe that an artist or writer is the closest thing in the contemporary world to a shaman (Moore in Millidge, 2011, p. 6).

Unlike other emic and etic understandings,[1] esotericism and magic, according to Moore, are not instruments of manipulating reality, of imposing the spiritual seeker's will. Moore suggests that the seeker should tune in to the universe, not imposing, but accepting its will. This definition of magic is "less invasive and intrusive" (Moore in Berlatsky, 2011, p. 84) and more positive, bright, and even funny. Moore argues that magic and esotericism should be open to everyone, not a hidden and absolute knowledge reserved for a spiritual or political elite.

> I understand that the word 'occult' means hidden, but surely that is not meant to be the final state of all this information, hidden forever. I don't see why there is any need to further obscure things that are actually lucid and bright. Language and strange terminology—to keep them as some private mystery. I think there is much darkness in magic. I can understand that is part of the theatre. I can understand Aleister Crowley, who I think was a great intellect that was sometimes let down by his own flair of showmanship . . . There are some people who seek evil. I don't think there is such a thing as evil, but there are people who seek it as kind of a Goth thing. … What occultism needs is someone to open the windows. It's too stuffy and it smells. Let's get some fresh air, throw open the curtains . . . I'm not actually trying to look spooky. I dress in black because it makes me look less fat. It's as simple as that . . . Surely, this is about illumination, casting light on things. I'm an illuminist (Moore in Berlatsky, 2011, p. 80–81).

Magic and esotericism permeate several of Moore's books. In *Swamp Thing* (Moore, Bissette, and Woch, 1984–1987), he develops a sort of "holistic ecotheology", where every living thing is connected (Kraemer and Lewis, 2015, p. 221). In *From Hell* (Moore and Campbell, 1989–1996), he narrates the violent esoteric and political fanaticism of William Gull/Jack the Ripper. But it is in *Promethea* (Moore and Williams III, 1999–2005) that Moore develops a sort of spiritual manifesto, which he blends with Kabbalah, Tarot, Alchemy, Islam, Christianity, etc. (Hanegraaff, 2016). Promethea is the incarnation of imagination itself, who is capable of ascending to the divine and coming back to humankind to save it from its materialism, violence, and greed. Promethea embodies all religions and spiritual manifestations, as she is the expression of creative, artistic, and magical language. Promethea is both profane and religious, fleshly and metaphysical, the Madonna and the whore; she is "dialectical epiphany, the substance of history itself" (Carney, 2006, p. 67).

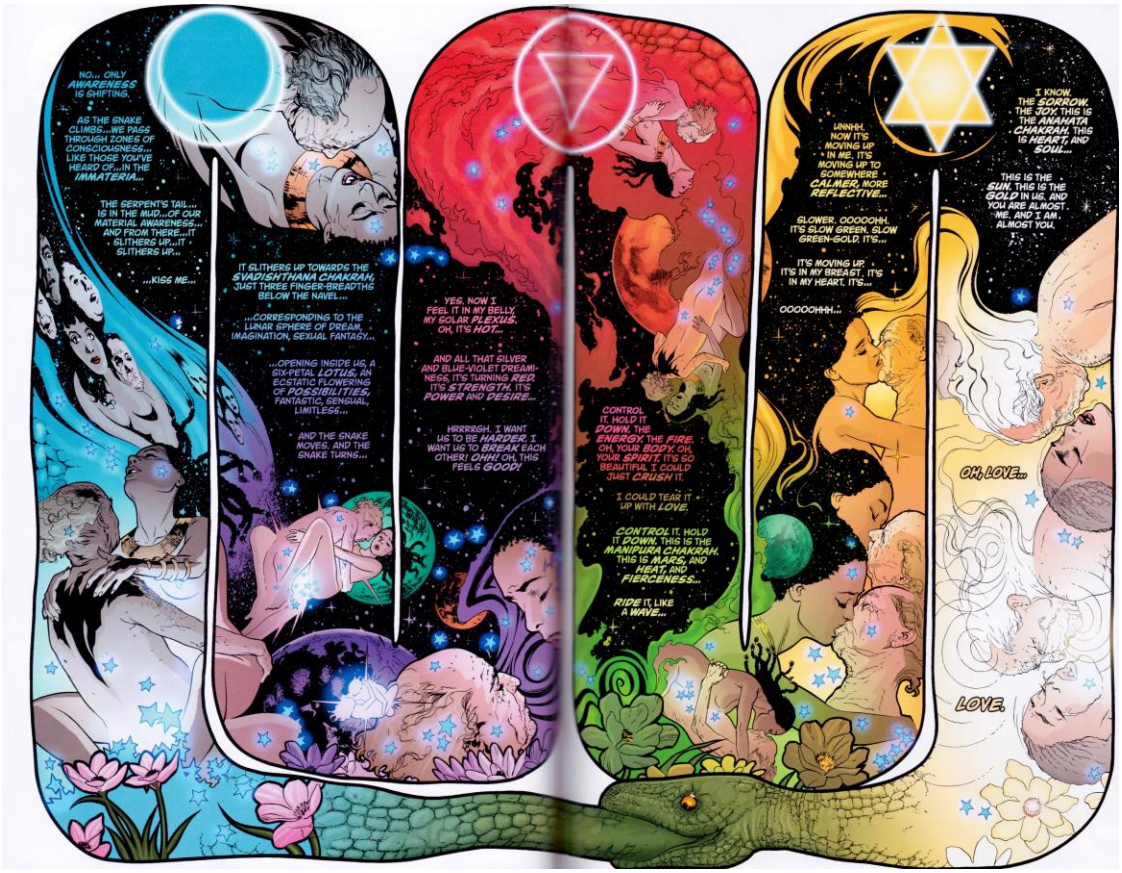

Fig. 6 © Moore and Williams III, *Promethea*, 1995–2005

Moore's unsettled knowledge can also be grasped in his innovative narrative techniques. He is capable of enabling the reader to relate to the stories he tells by playing with different layers of narration and intertextuality, blending music, backgrounds, stories, and voices (Kraemer and Winslade, 2010). Moore's comics are not easy to understand; they often require a second reading. Furthermore, he uses unusual layouts, which require the reader to move the book, changing its position. Finally, in *Promethea*, the reader becomes part of the book itself.

> Promethea many times looks at us directly . . . the reader becomes more frequent, until finally both word and image reflect the readers themselves. Towards the climactic close of the comic series, the character addresses the reader directly (Howell, 2015, p. 391).

David B.

Pierre François Beauchard was born in Nîmes in France in 1959 and studied fine arts at the École Duperré in Paris. As narrated in *L'Ascension du Haut Mal*— translated into English as *Epileptic* (1996-2003)—his artistic name, David B., was a way of separating his personal life from his artistic alter ego. He chose the name that his mother would have liked to have given

him, as she was particularly fascinated by Jewish culture and spirituality, in opposition to her father's antisemitism and conservatism (David B.'s grandfather). In 1990, David B. founded the independent publishing house L'Association together with Jean-Christophe Menu, Lewis Trondheim, Matt Konture, Patrice Killoffer, Stanislas, and Mokeït. This publisher played a key role in promoting innovative graphic novels in French, but with a global impact. The most famous book published by *L'Association* was Marjane Satrapi's autobiography, *Persepolis* (2003), which became a bestseller, leading to a movie adaptation.

Between 1996 and 2003, David B. published his masterpiece, *Epileptic*, which won several prizes, such as the Rodolphe-Töpffer, Ignatz, Angoulême, and Eisner awards. In this autobiographical book, David B. narrates the illness of his brother Jean-Christophe and his family's sorrow, doubts, and social marginalisation. As David B. explains, epilepsy in the 1970s was a mysterious illness with few scientific treatments, which stigmatised its victims. His parents sought out the available scientific remedies, but when they failed, they started exploring alternative religious healing, navigating the esoteric and new age French counterculture, looking for a miraculous cure. This religious quest had deep roots in David B.'s family; David B.'s mother considered herself to be Cathar, while his father was deeply religious and a follower of Rosicrucianism. They both were avid readers of René Guénon, Julius Evola, Raymond Abellio, Robert Charroux, Jacques Bergier, and other esotericists (Pasquier, 2006). The young David B., who was fond of history, was fascinated by this imaginative counter-history all while keeping it at a distance.

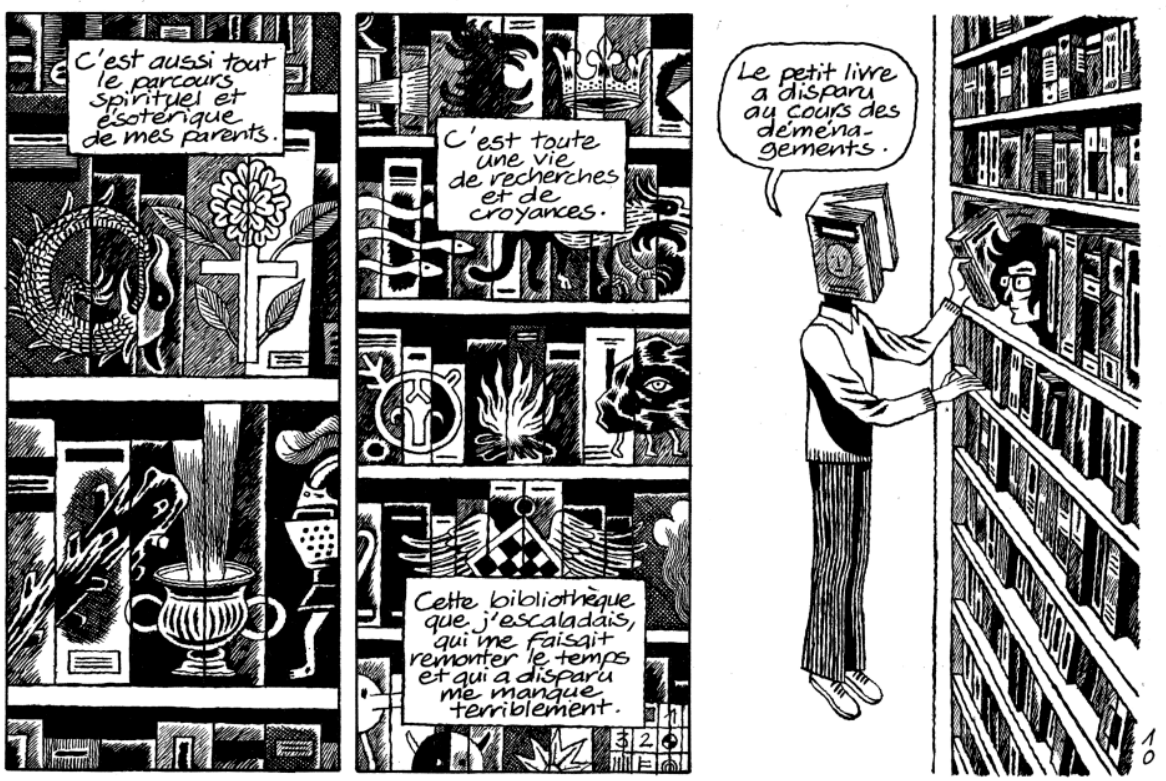

Fig. 7. © David B. "Heterography 2: Bibliothèques", *Religiographies* vol. 1, no. 1, 2023

Unlike Hugo Pratt and Alan Moore, David B. does not belong to a religious movement and does not practice religious rituals. On the contrary, David B.'s involvement with esoteric and new age movements was often negative, involving people who could not help his brother or, even worse, were charlatans who tried to take advantage of his needy family, as was the case of Raymond Abellio, who suggested to David B's mother that she have sex with him as part of her spiritual quest. While the contradictions, hypocrisies, and frauds of esoteric and new age movements have been exposed in David B.'s artistic production, this does not prevent him from exploring esoteric symbols, narratives, and doctrines, which have become a particular aspect of his art. We can find in David B.'s output references to alchemy, Kabbalah, Traditionalism, Islamic esotericism, Swedenborg, etc. Indeed, he has been described as the "master of esoteric novels"[2]. David B.'s esotericism takes different forms: 1) an imaginative language which helped him in exploring and offsetting void and pain, illness and death; 2) a metaphor for expressing his marginalisation; and 3) art itself, serving as an instrument to explore the unconscious and humankind, referring back to surrealist artists (Bauduin, 2014).

David B. started reading esoteric books when he was twelve. He found them in the library of his parents, who were art professors. René Guénon's *Le Roi du Monde* (1927) was a turning point and later became an inspiration for one of his artworks, *Mon frère est le Roi du monde* (2016) [My brother is the King of the world]. In this book, David drew seventy-two images (a Kabbalistic number) juxtaposing thirty-six representations of the king of the world, a mythic, all-powerful figure, and thirty-six images of his brother, who represented the fragility of illness and humanity: "It is the image of the loss of power against omnipotence" (David B., 2016, p. 20). David B. depicted his brother, wincing in pain, disfigured by epileptic attacks. On the other hand, page after page, we witness a magical overlapping: weakness becomes strength, darkness becomes light, his brother becomes the king of the world (Fig. 8).

Fig. 8 © David. B *Mon frère est le Roi du monde*, 2016

Esoteric narratives and imaginings have been an instrument to cope with illness, sorrow, and death for David B. Esoteric symbols and narratives fill the voids, the silences and absences left by epilepsy. In fact, when his brother had epileptic attacks, the young David B. imagined that he was stranded in an inaccessible dimension. That is why masks recur in his work, representing the unspeakable. David B.'s masks are mysterious and difficult to comprehend. They do not represent absence of meaning, but semantic abundance and instability.

One of the most important topics in David B.'s books is death and the impossible fight against it (Pontier, 2010). He described his brother's attacks as "little deaths" (interview at the Festival Bilbolul, 2022). "To see him 'die' daily, we end up having the impression of witnessing a large number of deaths, therefore a kind of massacre"[3]. Sometimes death became an obsession, as when through a character representing David B. himself, he said, "The certainty of having to die one day made me want to die right away" (David B., 1999). But this does not imply gloom; David B. introduces humour even when discussing sensitive topics. Furthermore, the fight against death, represented in several battle scenes with knives, swords, and guns, is surprisingly nonviolent. It does not hurt and darkly praises life.

> At night, nightmares come galloping through our heads. The Pale Horse appeared in the Middle Ages, it is found in different forms: Hacqumart, Chauchemar, Cauchmar. Chaucher means to ride and trample; Mar is the Francization of the Saxon word Mahrt. It designates a nocturnal demon appearing in the form of an emaciated horse that weighs on the sleep of humans. It is a representation of Death or the Devil from which we escape by riding our own mount to embark on a great nocturnal flight that ends when we wake up. Every night I fight and escape death (David B., 1992).

In his artistic production, David B. depicts several heterodox and marginalised religious and political movements, such as the Jewish Sabbatai Sevi community in Venice (David B., 2010), the Adamite, Taborite, and Hussite movements in Bohemia, Hakim al Muqanna's movement in Persia (David B., 2006), and many others. These marginal historical subjects reflect David B.'s perceived and experienced marginality, as argued by Pasquier: "David B. places himself on the side of the freaks, and not as a curious or disgusted observer. Jean-Christophe is a freak, his family becomes one after him, and all this bizarre humanity that they meet during their wanderings is made up of an infinity of freaks" (Pasquier, 2006, p. 4).

> Yes, when my brother got sick we became a minority, we changed position in society. My brother had become a sick person, and we the family members of a sick person. I remember when my brother would have a seizure on the street, people would stop and look at him and say, "Who is that, what's wrong with him? He is a madman, a drug addict, he must be put in jail" (David B. in the Invisible Lines Project 2022, p. 12).

The uses of esotericism (exploring and representing sorrow and marginalisation) are first mentioned in the realm of secularity, but David B.'s artistic quest goes further, exploring the metaphysical dimension, describing his connection with transcendence and the (collective) unconscious. A key topic of David B.'s artistic production is the re-enactment of dreams and

visions he has experienced, which have become for him a source of knowledge and guidance: “I don’t believe in God, but I do believe in dreams” (David B., interview at the Festival Bilbolbul, 2022). Furthermore, sometimes in his visions he grasps something otherworldly, something akin to a protecting angel:

> There were people who were protected by angels and in my opinion, I could believe in a protector angel for me, under the influence of this moment. Maybe also because I was stronger than my brother, I didn’t get sick, I was able to resist better than my sister all the problems my brother’s illness brought and I felt more protected, but now I don’t really know if he was an angel or if it was my personal strength doing this thing, but I’ve always been interested in beliefs and the fact that there can be something above us, I don’t know…(David B., interview at the Festival Bilbolbul, 2022).

Like Alan Moore, David B. does not reduce the transcendent dimension to the physical realm. Dreams, visions, and ecstatic experiences are not simply physiological experiences of the human being; they are the fruit of a connection with another dimension: “I have the impression that in my head, coming from elsewhere, maybe that’s poetry, precisely” (Pontier, 2010, p. 57). This connection between ontological dimensions is perfectly explained in a short story, where David B. depicts himself meeting a professor of surrealism in a café in Venice, who explains the nature of dreams and visions.

> What is the nature of this external element?” asks David B. “Well, of course some of my colleagues immediately decided that it was God! Or at least one of its manifestations. Let’s leave the idea of God aside for now. These elements in their nature are comparable to air, fire, water… This element, penetrating the brain, changes the weather. I am talking about time in the meteorological sense… because in the sleeping mind there is a certain climate.”

This “meteorological” understanding of dreams and visions, which are part of humankind but do not belong to it, leaves many questions about religion and spirituality unanswered. David B.’s complicated and unsettled relationship with the transcendent is a recurrent topic in his artistic production. For example, in *Leonora*, he describes the initiatory quest of a young woman in 15th-century Italy who is looking for the Grail (David B. and Martin, 2004). Leonora meets a hermit, who looks like a saint but is vicious; then a wolf, who looks feral but is a saint. This uncertainty is not meant to deny the distinction between good and evil. Leonora’s quest is successful: she defeats the Devil and finds the Grail, but to do so, she must purify herself and question her understanding of reality. David B.’s unsettled knowledge and uncertain spirituality is well represented by characters such as the “hesitant knight” who, while unsure of his quest, is able to help Leonora. Other interesting characters are the radical Hussite Jan Žižka and his bride (Fig. 9), who are invited by Jesus Christ himself to climb the wall of heaven. But once reached the wall walk, they become trapped in doubt. Which side is right? Žižka asks Jesus, “Are you Christ or the Devil? Is this heaven just an illusion?”. Both questions are left without an answer. Later, Žižka and his wife are invited by the inhabitants of heaven to come down from the wall walk, but they prefer to remain there, entertaining everyone with music (David B., 2006). David B. is the “hesitant

knight", unsettled, who, like the Žižkas, does not embrace religion, preferring a liminal position and cheering his readers through his art.

As with Hugo Pratt and Alan Moore, we can grasp David B.'s spiritual quest in his writing and drawing techniques and in his relationship with the reader. In David B. drawing is crucial and sometimes self-sufficient. In his drawings, we can see the influence of old masters such as Brueghel and Bosch, and of surrealist painters such as René Magritte and Max Ernst. Black is dominant, representing the darkness and the uncharted territories of dreams and visions (Pontier, 2010). Unlike the work of Pratt, who plays with blurriness and the untold, David B.'s drawings are extremely clear and detailed: the unsettledness is not embodied by blurriness but by the abundance of meanings and particulars. Finally, for David B., drawing became a sort of meditative technique.

Tracing a sign with ink sometimes makes me feel present on the paper, and at the same time, I feel the world expand. I feel that the thing I'm doing becomes the world, being part of the world. Drawing helped me to go beyond the pain, beyond the sadness and remorse I had[4].

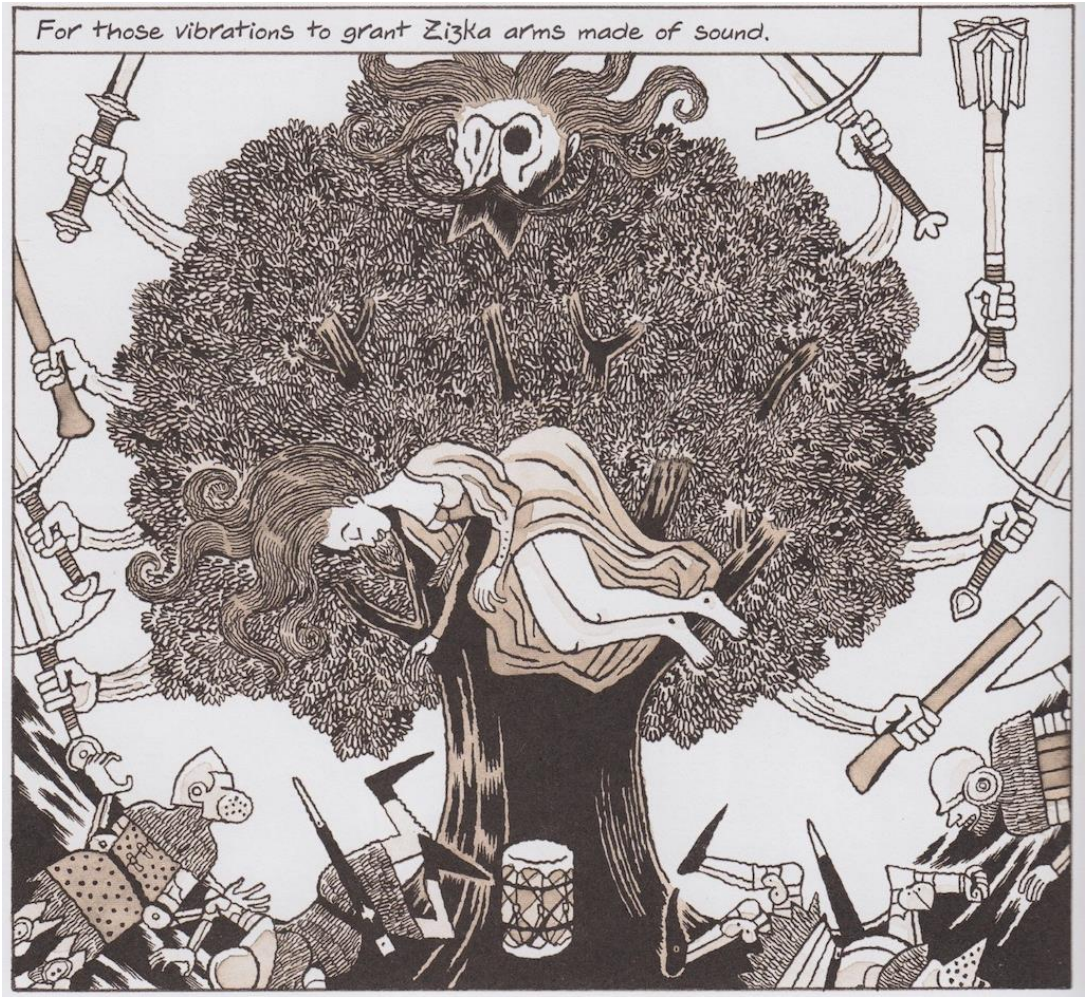

Fig. 9 © David. B ,*The Armed Garden*, 2006

Conclusions

Despite the blurred boundaries between fiction and reality, I do not think these authors can be placed in the realm of "hyper-religion" described by Adam Possamai (2002), which implies a process of commodification, disenchantment, and estrangement from society and culture. Their political battles (against colonialism, neo-liberalism, and Fascism), their religious experiences, and their grief are real and deeply connected to societies. Furthermore, these authors have a cultural and political impact beyond the frontiers of comics and art, impacting the political and religious imaginations of many readers.

Hugo Pratt, Alan Moore, and David B. reproduce in their artistic production esoteric narratives, symbols, and doctrines. These topics are not simply devices of narrative or entertainment but are part of their spiritual and artistic quests. These authors can thus be included in the frame of the new age discourse (Sutcliffe, 2005) and in the frame of the occulture as an analytical tool (Kokkinen, 2013). In fact, these authors, like many spiritual seekers in contemporary societies: 1) put the accent on the individual's understanding to question institutional religions, 2) propose universalist discourses, and 3) blur the boundaries between the religious and the secular.

That said, I find that the frame is not sufficient as it does not offer: 1) an understanding of how spirituality and esotericism have changed or 2) the particularity of the comics medium. In this article, I showed how comics create a place for religious innovation. For these artists, art and spirituality are deeply interconnected; both have the power to explore the unconscious as well as society. These authors are not interested in religious authority, veracity, or tradition, as they believe that the source lies in experience itself, in the capacity of performing the truth, rather than possessing it. These authors propose another way of understanding and experiencing esotericism and spirituality, which cannot be grasped through the main definitions of esotericism (e.g., rejected, stigmatised, absolute, hidden). For these comics artists, esotericism is an unsettled, anti-dogmatic, syncretic knowledge that reveals moral and religious doubts and that blurs the boundaries between reality and fiction. Furthermore, this "unsettling knowledge" is meant to "unsettle" the reader, too, who is invited to question his/her prejudices, not to simply take in and shelter a superior or absolute form of knowledge.

One could argue that this "unsettled knowledge" has found in comics the perfect medium, one which "has a unique potential to convey religious concepts—and perhaps even religious experiences—through the unusual vehicle of a visual/textual medium that demands reader participation" (Kraemer and Lewis, 2015, p. 223).

The fractured surface of the comics page, with its patchwork of different images, shapes, and symbols, presents the reader with a surfeit of interpretive options, creating an experience that is always decentered, unstable, and unfixable . . . The very discontinuity of the page urges readers to do the work of inference, to negotiate over and over the passage from submissive reading to active interpreting (Hatfield, 2005, p. 17).

To conclude, the “unsettled knowledge” frame could, in my opinion, be applied to other contexts, such as the literature of Jorge Luis Borges and the cinema of Federico Fellini, and perhaps beyond the frame of art. However, these hypotheses should be empirically tested. In my opinion, this new category may be useful because it helps to shift our focus from ideas (Faivre), historiography (Hanegraaff), and religious authorities (Von Stuckrad) by focusing on practitioners and sympathisers who display their ideas but also their doubts and contradictions. This different perspective is in line with new approaches to religious and esoteric studies, which put the accent on the everyday life experiences and on the agency of its actors (McGuire, 2008; Asprem and Strube, 2020).

Biographical note

Francesco Piraino is a sociologist of religion, culture, and art. He obtained his PhD in Sociology in 2016 at the Scuola Normale Superiore (Florence) and the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (Paris), and was a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Research Fellow at KU Leuven. He is currently a research associate at the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard Divinity School and director of the Centre for Comparative Studies of Civilizations and Spiritualities at the Cini Foundation in Venice. Piraino works on spirituality, esotericism, mysticism, and the relationship between art and religion, especially, but not exclusively, in the Islamic and Sufi frame. He recently published *Le soufisme en Europe : islam, ésotérisme et new age* (Karthala, 2023) and edited *Religious Dimensions of Conspiracy Theories Comparing and Connecting Old and New Trends* (with Marco Pasi and Egil Asprem, Routledge 2022).

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Note

[1] For the emic perspective see Aleister Crowley (Pasi, 2011; Bogdan, 2014) and for the etic perspective see the research project "Alternative Rationalities and Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective" https://cas-e.de/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/CAS-E-Project-Outline.pdf
[2] https://www.coconinopress.it/prodotto/dedalus/
[3] http://neuviemeart.citebd.org/spip.php?article231
[4] https://hamelin.net/disegnare-linvisibile-intervista-david-b-invisible-lines/