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*Countercultural Gnosis and the End of the World*

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# Alan Moore's *Promethea*: Countercultural Gnosis and the End of the World

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## Abstract

Alan Moore's *Promethea* (1999 to 2005) is among the most explicitly “gnostic,” “esoteric,” and “occultist” comics strips ever published. Hailed as a virtuoso performance in the art of comics writing, its intellectual content and the nature of its spiritual message have been neglected by scholars. While the attainment of *gnosis* is clearly central to Moore's message, the underlying metaphysics is more congenial to the pantheist perspective of ancient Hermetism than to Gnosticism in its classic typological sense defined by dualism and anti-cosmic pessimism. Most importantly, *Promethea* is among the most explicit and intellectually sophisticated manifestoes of a significant new religious trend in contemporary popular culture. Its basic assumption is that there is ultimately no difference between imagination and reality, so that the question of whether gods, demons, or other spiritual entities are “real” or just “imaginary” becomes pointless. As a result, the factor of religious *belief* becomes largely irrelevant, and its place is taken by the factors of *personal experience* and *meaningful practice*.

## Keywords

Alan Moore – *Promethea* – Gnosticism – Hermetism

In his monograph *Mutants & Mystics*, published in 2011,<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey J. Kripal has demonstrated how deeply the extremely popular genre of superhero comics depends on gnostic, esoteric, and occultist references and traditions. On the

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1 Kripal 2011.

pages that follow, I hope to make a modest contribution to the field of research that Kripal's work has opened up, by analyzing a particularly representative series of "gnostic comics" created by the famous British writer Alan Moore in collaboration with penciling artist J.H. Williams III and inker Mick Gray. Their *Promethea* series was published from 1999 to 2005 and has received wide recognition as a virtuoso performance in the art of comics writing and drawing.<sup>2</sup> Specialists in media studies have understandably focused on its formal aspects, but clearly feel out of their depth in discussing its religious or spiritual contents, which usually receive short shrift or are treated with bland incomprehension. On the following pages I will try to fill this hiatus by discussing *Promethea* as a significant example of the search for gnosis in contemporary popular culture.

Kripal himself selected *Promethea* for special discussion in the Introduction of *Mutants & Mystics* (next to Grant Morrison's *The Invisibles*, published from 1994–2000),<sup>3</sup> and his analysis left no doubt about its explicit gnostic message:

By *gnostic*, Moore means a particular kind of direct and immediate experiential knowledge of one's own divinity that cannot be reduced to reason or faith and stands very much opposed to the consensus reality of society and religion: "Faith is for sissies who daren't go and look for themselves. That's my basic position. Magic is based upon gnosis. Direct knowledge."<sup>4</sup>

In spite of the attention it receives in the Introduction to *Mutants & Mystics*, however, *Promethea* plays no further role in the rest of Kripal's book: except for one passing reference, it is never mentioned again. This might seem a surprising omission at first sight; but in fact, it provides us with some indirect clues to *Promethea*'s specificity in the wider context of superhero comics. One aspect of *Promethea* that makes it special is its explicit feminist agenda.<sup>5</sup> Whereas Kripal's *Mutants & Mystics* focuses on the dominant genre of masculine superheroes or "He-Men," with much attention to male erotic trauma as a source of creative energy, *Promethea* is the rare example of a female superhero whose superpowers must clearly come from somewhere else. As such, she simply does not seem to fit Kripal's analysis of the comics genre and its underlying erotics. A second factor is more immediately relevant to my concerns in this article: although *Promethea* does contain some secrets hidden beneath the

2 E.g. Di Liddo 2009; Hoff Kraemer and Winslade 2010.

3 Kripal 2011, 8–16.

4 Kripal 2011, 15–16; with reference to Moore and Babcock 2007, 131.

5 Cf. Green 2011.

surface, it differs from other superhero comics in requiring no hermeneutics to demonstrate its “esoteric” content. In this particular case, readers do not need Kripal’s exegetical skills to unveil its hidden message for them, because that message is stated openly and spelled out in detail. Indeed, as will be seen, *Promethea* is perhaps the most explicitly “occultist” comics ever published. It is a work with thoroughly didactic intent, a crash course in occult philosophy as Moore understands it. In this regard one might perhaps call it “exoteric” rather than “esoteric.”

### Alan Moore’s Encounter with Asclepius

Born in Northampton in 1953, Alan Moore has received accolades as possibly “the best writer in the history of comic books.”<sup>6</sup> His highly innovative *Watchmen* series (1987) is known for its deconstruction of superhero conventions in the context of a grim analysis of Thatcher’s England, and propelled its writer to fame in the later 1980s. Several of his other works, notably *From Hell* and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, have become the basis for mainstream movie adaptations. Describing himself as an atheist in his earlier years, Moore made his coming-out as an occultist magician in the wake of an impressive religious experience on 7 January 1994. On this day, he claims, he encountered a Roman snake god named Glycon who turned out to be none else than the ancient god of healing Asclepius:

Starting with January 1994, all of a sudden, [the occult] suddenly got a little less of a remote academic topic for me. I found myself in the middle of what seemed to be a full-blown magical experience that I could not really account for.

When you’ve found that you’ve spent at least part of an evening talking to an entity that tells you that it is a specific Goetic demon that was first mentioned in the Apocrypha, there’s only so many ways that you can take that. The most obvious way is that you had some sort of hallucination, or that you had some sort of mental breakdown. Something like that. Which is fine, unless there have been other people there with you who had similar experiences at the time, or something similar. Then, when you say, Alright this was some sort of real experience, you then have to think Well, was it therefore something that was *purely* internal? Was this some part of myself that I’ve given a name and face to, or pro-

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6 Khoury 2008.

jected in some way? That's possible. Or, was this what it said it was? Was this some entirely *external* entity that *actually* was what it claimed to be and was talking to me. That's possible. I tend to try and not rule out any of those. The thing that actually feels most satisfying is the idea that actually it might be both of them.<sup>7</sup>

Moore is here describing a classic dilemma for occultists. Whether such entities must be understood psychologically or metaphysically was a core question already for the 20th century's most influential occultist author, Aleister Crowley,<sup>8</sup> who happens to make some prominent appearances in *Promethea*. Describing his experiences with the snake god Glycon, Moore is quick to emphasize that according to our chief ancient source on the matter (Lucian of Samosata's satire of Alexander of Abonoteichus, who presented himself as a priest of "the new Asclepius"),<sup>9</sup> Glycon was a simple hoax.<sup>10</sup> But this fact does not worry him. On the contrary, it leads him to his chief point:

To me, the IDEA of the god IS the god. . . . THAT was what I believe that visited me and my friend upon this first occasion, and [with] which I've had contact on subsequent occasions."<sup>11</sup>

A few years later, Moore was thrilled to discover that the famous science fiction writer Philip K. Dick had claimed to be in contact with Asclepius as well,<sup>12</sup> thus strengthening Moore's assumption that whatever this "entity" might be, it could not be limited to his personal psyche alone.

What should we make of this experience? Moore is perfectly open about his use of psilocybin mushrooms and other psychoactive substances as spiritual and magical agents,<sup>13</sup> and this makes him representative of an important but under-investigated phenomenon or current in contemporary spirituality that I have elsewhere proposed to refer to as "Entheogenic Esotericism." In its strictest understanding, this term refers to the religious use of psychoactive substances to induce unusual states of consciousness in which practitioners believe they are "filled," "possessed," or "inspired" by some kind of divine entity, presence,

7 Moore and Babcock 2007, 125.

8 Pasi 2011, 143–160.

9 Robert 1981.

10 Moore and Babcock 2007, 126.

11 Moore and Babcock 2007, 126.

12 Moore and Babcock 2007, 127.

13 Moore and Babcock 2007, 128–129.

or force.<sup>14</sup> Presumably, psychedelic agents facilitated Moore's encounter with Glycon *alias* Asclepius in 1994 as well. Given the intrinsic nature of psychedelic visuals,<sup>15</sup> this perhaps makes it easier to understand his description of how one of the entities he encountered revealed its true nature to him:

when I actually was allowed to see what the creature looked like, or what it was prepared to show me, it was this latticework . . . that was turning itself inside out as I spoke to it, and I was talking to my partner at the time and sort of saying, This thing's showing us it's got an extra dimension I haven't got, and it's trying to tell me that it's good at mathematics.<sup>16</sup>

With this, we are led straight into the heart of a contemporary esoteric worldview based upon the post-Kantian notion that our phenomenal three-dimensional world is merely the reflection in our minds of a deeper reality of noumenal mystery. True reality is believed to be ultimately beyond our comprehension; but following a broadly Platonic and Pythagorean line of speculation, it may at least be approached through mathematical abstractions (traditionally thought to be perceivable by the Intellect, a mental faculty superior to Reason). While we are capable of experiencing the "energies" of ultimate or noumenal reality, its essence or true nature just cannot be understood in terms of our common Cartesian distinctions between mind and nature or spirit and matter.

This perspective allows Moore to rely on *correspondences* and *analogies* rather than historical connections or causal mechanisms in his efforts to make sense of his spiritual experiences. For instance, it now becomes deeply meaningful, rather than just coincidental, that Glycon is associated with the god of healing Asclepius; that the same name appears in the Hermetic literature; that

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14 Hanegraaff 2013b. In this article I draw a distinction between Entheogenic Religion in a strict sense (defined by the use of psychoactive substances) and in a wider sense (referring to the use of other techniques for altering consciousness, such as specific breathing techniques, rhythmic drumming, ritual prayer and incantations, and so on). For a short systematic overview of these different types of trance induction and their relevance to religion, cf. Hanegraaff 2015. Entheogenic Religion becomes Entheogenic *Esotericism* if these entheogenic experiences are interpreted in terms of previous traditions currently classed under the "esotericism" rubric (for a short overview, see Hanegraaff 2013a, 18–44).

15 For the phenomenology of psychedelic experience (induced by a specific class of psychoactive agents including e.g. Psilocybine, LSD-25, and Dimethyltryptamine) see the excellent visual representations in Grey 2012. As one can see there, a seemingly infinite "latticework" (in Moore's formulation, see text) of geometrical patterns in bright colours is highly characteristic of closed-eyes visions induced by such agents.

16 Moore and Babcock 2007, 127.

Asclepius' magical caduceus is circled by two serpents; that the messenger of *gnosis* appeared as a serpent coiled around a tree according to Gnostic interpretations of the Genesis narrative; and that this symbolism recalls the DNA double helix, so that the symbolism of a "cosmic serpent," which also appears in Ayahuasca visions, might be seen as the molecular key to the mystery of life.<sup>17</sup>

By means of such analogical reasoning, Moore leads us straight into the heart of a radical spiritual vision that perceives meaningful correspondences between advanced theories in the natural sciences, elements of transpersonal psychology, psychedelics, and the study of religious symbolism, all in the service of a systematic assault on Cartesian dualism and materialist philosophy.<sup>18</sup> Like all such responses to "the problem of disenchantment,"<sup>19</sup> the ultimate motivation is a search for meaningful and inspiring values that must be grounded in the true nature of reality. Let us now take a closer look at *Promethea* to see what those values are like.

### Fiction as Reality

First and foremost, *Promethea* is an exuberant celebration of the creative imagination.<sup>20</sup> The narrative is based consistently on one single Master Thesis:

*There is no difference between fiction and reality.*

This central focus makes Alan Moore's work extremely relevant to a currently emerging subfield in the study of contemporary religion and esotericism that is sometimes referred to as "fiction-based religions,"<sup>21</sup> sometimes as "hyper-real religions,"<sup>22</sup> and sometimes as "invented religions."<sup>23</sup> The terminology is still very much in a state of flux, but scholars seem to agree that in much of contemporary popular culture (whether online or offline), the question of whether gods, demons, angels, or other spiritual entities or realities are "real"

17 Moore and Babcock 2007, 128, with reference to Narby 1998. Ayahuasca is a famous entheogenic agent from the Amazon region (see e.g. Shanon 2002; Labate and Cavnar 2014).

18 For general overviews of such attempts to synthesize religion, science, and psychology, see Hanegraaff 1996/1998 or Partridge 2004.

19 Asprem 2014.

20 Di Liddo 2009, 99.

21 Davidsen 2014.

22 Possamai 2012.

23 Cusack 2010.

or “imaginary” is becoming ever less relevant to practitioners. As a result, the distinction between “belief” and “non-belief” is becoming a non-issue for them as well.

If the centrality of belief is declining in contemporary religion, its place seems to be taken by the all-important dimensions of *personal experience* and *meaningful practice*. What matters most to practitioners is that it *works* for them to invoke or otherwise interact with spiritual entities, through prayer, ritual, meditation, visualization, and so on. In other words, what counts is that the experiences and practices are powerful and rewarding to them.<sup>24</sup> From such a perspective, theoretical and intellectual questions such as “in what exact sense” can these entities be considered to be real, or what theoretical concept of “reality” is entailed in calling them real, seem a somewhat stuffy legacy of Protestant obsessions quite alien to most practitioners. They are usually happy to leave such questions for philosophers to figure out.

Alan Moore can be seen as such a philosopher, and *Promethea* should be considered his chief theoretical statement. The series is preceded by an essay written in scholarly prose, titled “The Promethea Puzzle: An Adventure in Folklore,” in which Moore discusses the historical emergence of the figure of “Promethea.”<sup>25</sup> It all began, he tells us, with *A Faerie Romance: an epic sentimental fantasy* written around 1780 by the New England poet Charlton Sennet (1751–1803), in which the nymph Promethea appeared as one of the four handmaidens of the Faerie Queen Titania. Her next appearance was in a comic strip drawn by Margaret Taylor Case, published in Randolph Hearst’s *New York Clarion* from 1901 onwards and titled “Little Margie in Misty Magic Land.” Next, during World War I, popular rumors began floating around about a warrior angel “Promethea” who sometimes appeared to soldiers in the trenches. In 1924, the pulp magazine *Astonishing Stories* began featuring a series called “Promethea, Warrior Queen of Hy Brasil,” illustrated by Grace Brannagh. When the magazine was taken over by a new publisher in 1938, *Astonishing Stories*’ successor *Smashing Comics* continued the tradition with a new Promethea series drawn by William Woolcott until his death in 1970. Finally, Steven Shelley continued the series until his death in 1991. Alan Moore now picks up the Promethea tradition with his new comics series, starting in 1999.

On the face of it, Moore’s introductory prose essay looks like a perfectly convincing piece of historical writing, but in fact it turns out to be his first *theoretical* statement. Similar to Jean Baudrillard’s famous treatise *Simulacra and*

24 Cf. Hanegraaff 2007.

25 Moore et al. 1999–2000.



*Simulation*, which begins provocatively with a wholly invented quotation from the biblical book of Ecclesiastes,<sup>26</sup> the point is that none of Moore's historical references "really" exist anywhere else than in his own fictional universe. It just so happens that Moore has invented all of them. It is here that we see the beginning of a complex game that he is playing with his readers and their ideas about reality.

### The Story of Promethea

At the very beginning of the *Promethea* cycle, the main protagonist, a college student named Sophie Banks, is busy researching the Promethea myth for her term paper. In other words, she is doing precisely what the average reader is most likely *not* doing: checking the literary sources mentioned in Moore's introductory essay and tracing them back to their historical origins. These investigations lead her to visit Barbara Shelley, the widow of the last Promethea author Steven Shelley.

Through the following series of events, we learn that the fictional figure of Promethea is capable of incarnating in the real world as a demi-goddess with incredible superpowers. Her origins go back to early fifth century Alexandria, where the last pagans are being persecuted by the Christians. A Hermetic philosopher sends his young daughter into the desert to save her from the killers who are coming for him, and it is there that she meets Thoth-Hermes. But the god/s cannot keep her safe in this world: "our influence here is waning, our priests slain by those of the new god. A dark age is coming."<sup>27</sup> However, they can take her to their own world, the "Immateria" or realm of ideas, where she will no longer be a little girl but will live eternally *as a story*. Will she ever be able to return to this world, she asks? Well . . . , they answer, "sometimes, if a story is *very* special, it can quite take people *over*. We'll see."<sup>28</sup>

This process of being taken over by a story in fact happened to the poet Charlton Sennet in 1779.<sup>29</sup> In a dream he saw the faerie Queen Titania with her four helpmaidens, one of whom inspired him to write a long poem:

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26 Baudrillard 1994, 1.

27 Promethea # 1.

28 Promethea # 1.

29 Promethea # 4.

About their Queen, four nymphs in waiting stood,  
 Girded in armor, each of beauty rare  
 Courslip and Flax and Jenny-in-the-Wood  
 And sweet Promethea with her plaited hair

Promethea, the shepherd understood,  
 Had with her glammers captivated him;  
 With lips, with skin like polished betel-wood,  
 With ocean eyes, wherein a man might swim.

Her smile ethereal, magnificent,  
 Her lyric movements, her fragility,  
 Her gentleness, her orchidaceous scent  
 Enraptured him, enslaved him utterly.<sup>30</sup>

Charlton Sennet's story ends badly. While he is reciting his poem to his housemaid Anna, she is magically transformed into the faery Promethea, and he can no longer tell the difference between dream and reality. His passionate love affair with the faerie ends in disaster: his wife divorces him, his housemaid Anna dies while giving birth to a monstrous child, and Charlton spends the rest of his days in utter loneliness—although surrounded by elemental beings that he cannot see.

From now on, Promethea keeps incarnating from time to time, and it is always through the medium of art or poetry that she is invited into this world. This reflects Moore's conviction that art and magic are "almost completely interchangeable."<sup>31</sup> We are told that the 20th-century artists who wrote Promethea comics were in fact channeling her into their own bodies or those of their partners. This makes them into Sophie Bank's predecessors, and these previous Prometheas or vehicles of the faerie goddess are now watching her adventures with great curiosity from the realm of Immaterialia.

The last of the artists was Steven Shelley, and his wife Barbara was the last of the Prometheas. After his death she has put on weight and turned into an embittered and lonely woman, so when Sophie starts questioning her about Promethea, she shrugs her off and sends her on her way. In the meantime, however, the forces of darkness have learned of Sophie's inquiries. They want to prevent her from learning too much, lest she might become a new vessel for

30 Promethea # 4.

31 Martin 2014; Moore 2011, 189.

their mortal enemy Promethea. She gets attacked on the street by a shadow demon (a Smee), but is saved by a superheroine who suddenly turns up out of nowhere. This appears to be no one else than Barbara herself transformed into Promethea. It is the beginning of an apprenticeship and a friendship through which Sophie learns that she, too, has the power of transforming herself into Promethea by means of writing poetry:

I am Promethea, God-adopted one,  
 Reared in their immaterial hills and vales.  
 My tale is in the world of substance spun,  
 Yet is my substance in the world of tales

....

I am Promethea, art's fiercest spark  
 I am all inspiration, all desire,  
 Imagination's blaze in mankind's dark  
 I am Promethea, I bring you fire!<sup>32</sup>

Sophie alias Promethea finds herself transformed into a "science heroine" (not a science *fiction* heroine, for what could that possibly mean in a fictional universe?), and enters into collegial competition with the other superheroes who are active protecting the population of Moore's alternative New York, notably the "Five Swell Boys" who are battling a sinister killer known as The Painted Doll. Most spectacularly, she has to fight an army of demons who appear disguised as gangsters but reveal their real shapes to those who have the vision to see them. Behind them are sinister forces, notably a black magician named Benny Solomon and an organization that calls itself The Temple. Eventually, we learn that this is a group of naïve but determined Evangelicals who are convinced that Promethea is a demon. Here Moore is making the excellent point that contemporary Evangelicals and Christian Fundamentalists are among the most serious believers in the reality of the occult today. They *really* believe in demons and occult powers, arguably more so than many occultist practitioners, who tend to have a more complex, ironic, or distanced attitude towards questions of reality/unreality or existence/non-existence.

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32 Promethea # 1.

## Tarot Initiation and Tarot History

Moore then takes his reader through Sophie's first forays into the world of *Immateria*<sup>33</sup> and her meeting with the previous Prometheas (first introduced in *Promethea* # 4), who eventually join her in battling the forces of darkness. Meanwhile Sophie's friend Stacia Vanderveer, the prototype of a shallow teenage bimbo, is having a hard time catching up with what is happening; but eventually, she too embarks upon a parallel path of magical exploration that will bring her into conflict with Sophie.

Crucial to Sophie's own story is her step-by-step initiation into the mysteries of magic by means of the four Tarot suits: Cups, Swords, Coins or Pentacles, and Wands. In *Promethea* # 5, Sophie's guide is the former Promethea Margaret—no one else than Margaret Taylor Case, the author (as we have seen) of the original series "Little Margie in Mystic Magic Land." It is she who, transformed into Promethea, had made those appearances as an angel of mercy to soldiers in the trenches of World War I. Taking Sophie on a visionary tour through the 20th-century horrors of war, Margaret initiates her into the mysteries of the Cup: *Compassion* for suffering humanity.

In *Promethea* # 6, the former Promethea Grace (Grace Brannagh) initiates her into the Tarot mysteries of Swords, which stand for the power of *reason and discrimination* that slices through illusion ("frankly, dear, they cut through bullshit"). Sophie meets Grace in the threatening landscape of the comics she created while alive, "Hy Brasil," full of "torture, chambers, demon altars, hunchbacks and skeletons." As it turns out, Grace's work has been usurped by a writers' collective that goes by the name Marto Neptura, whose face appears in the sky like an all-seeing creator God. But Sophie appears to be learning fast: she breaks Marto Neptura's power by using the "Sword" of reductionist logic to destroy his appearance of divine omnipotence.

In *Promethea* # 7, Sophie is initiated into the mystery of Coins or Pentacles by yet another former Promethea: a fun-loving girl who goes by the incongruous name of Bill (because that is how she was imagined by her creator William Woolcott, who was gay). Coins/ Pentacles stands for the world of *the senses*: Bill is utterly in love with "all the things we have a taste for," such as food, comfort, love, wealth, fame, or happiness. The message is that such pursuits are not necessarily bad, as would be suggested by more ascetic or otherworldly interpretations of the search for *gnosis*: the things of this world are there for us to be enjoyed to the fullest, as long as we do not fall prey to the delusion that there is nothing else.

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33 *Promethea* # 3.

Finally, in *Promethea* # 10, Sophie is initiated into the mysteries of the Wand, “symbol of god considered as male . . . The symbol of the magician, of the will, of that which penetrates the mystery.” It happens through tantric sex with Jack Faust, a shady occultist in the Crowley tradition. Contrary to the view of some critics, whose politically correct reflexes seem to blind them to what is going on in this sequence,<sup>34</sup> I consider it to be one of the highlights of the *Promethea* cycle. Sure enough, it seems to begin as a rather sordid story, with the beautiful young heroine performing a striptease and consenting to intercourse with a horrible old man on a dirty mattress, in exchange for his magical knowledge. However, it culminates in an orgasmic experience of supreme love and divine union, when the two lovers succeed in leading the “serpent power” of *kundalini* all the way up from the lowest to the highest *chakra* and both find themselves transformed into their higher and better selves. The symbolism is clear, or should be: even the sordid realities of this dark and horrible world (symbolized by Jack Faust’s dirty room in a New York City basement) are not ultimately real, but can become a world of heavenly bliss through the magical power of our consciousness in union with our creative imagination. In basic Platonic terms, this transformation of the human passions is ultimately driven by erotic desire for ultimate beauty,<sup>35</sup> and thus we see how what begins with physical sex culminates in a transcendent experience of universal love.

Next we are presented to Moore’s vision of world history and the evolution of consciousness, explained in *Promethea* #12 through a dazzling tour-de-force of multilevel multimedia instruction.<sup>36</sup> The two snakes of *Promethea*’s caduceus delightfully introduce themselves as Mike and Mack (for “microcosm” and “macrocosm”!), and recite a long metric poem that takes Sophie from the period before the Big Bang all the way up to the present time. The poem is a running commentary on the twenty-two lower Arcana cards of the Tarot, and while those cards are presented one by one, Aleister Crowley is telling a story that explains the nature of the imagination in the form of a joke. Both Crowley and the universe (standing, again, for the parallel realities of microcosm and macrocosm) are moving simultaneously from the fetal state through the various stages of maturity towards old age, death, and ultimately rebirth. There is a bonus for readers who delight in puzzles: the name “*Promethea*” appears on Scrabble stones in a series of frankly amazing permutations (e.g. “Metaphore,” “Mater Hope,” “Ape Mother,” “Me Atop Her,” “O Mere Path,” “A Pro Theme,”

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34 E.g. Fischer 2004, 124, with reference to Linda Santiman.

35 Hanegraaff 2011.

36 Cf. Locke 2012, 391–394.

“Hear Tempo,” “O Harem Pet,” “O Reap Them,” “The Mop Era,” “Metro Heap,” “Meet Harpo,” and “Heart Poem”).

As for Moore’s vision of world history, it starts at the physical level, from the initial quantum vacuum through the Big Bang to the emergence of Planet Earth and animal life; then it moves from physical to cultural history, beginning with primitive and shamanic hunter/gatherer societies and leading up to classical civilization, “where history as we know it commences.”<sup>37</sup> Finally, we are taken from the Roman Empire to the Age of Reason, the emergence of industrial society, and the horrors of the World Wars. After World War II, the psychedelic age marks the beginning of a process of ever-quickening spiritual evolution, finally leading up to “the end of the world” (as we will see below). It should be noted that Moore’s evolutionist narrative, like most occultist views of world history, is unapologetically Whiggish and ethnocentric: the whole of world history converges upon the modern West, with no significant role for the Orient or any other culture of the world.

### The Sefirotic Tree

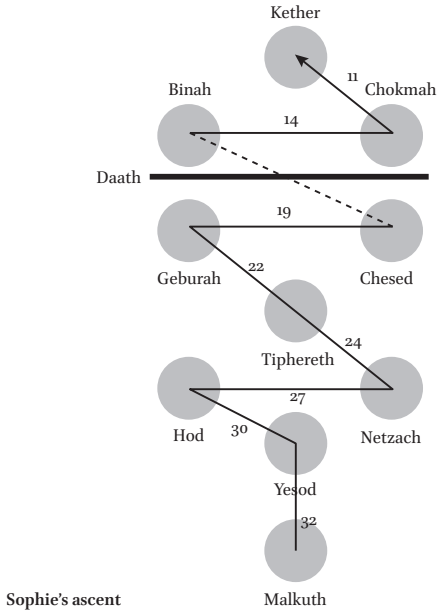
For many readers, the most puzzling part of *Promethea* is the middle section, where Sophie and Barbara travel from the Imateria through the ten Sefirotic spheres of the kabbalistic tree of life in search of Barbara’s deceased husband Steven Shelley. It is here that the conventional superhero format most clearly takes a back seat in favour of thoroughly didactic instruction about the true nature of reality and ultimate values.

Alan Moore’s 1999 *City of New York* is located, of course, at the bottom: in Malkuth (“Kingdom”), the material world. From here, Sophie takes route 32, at the end of which Charon takes her over the Styx to Yesod (“Foundation”). This is the lunar realm of the unconscious, the dream world or world of the dead. Here she finds Barbara, who seems to be talking with her deceased husband Steven but has just discovered that instead of the real Steven it is just his shadow. Sophie and Barbara take off over route 30 to Hod (“Splendour”). This is the sun-drenched world of the intellect, language, magic, thought, ideas, time, and communication.

Predictably, given those attributes, it is here that they meet Hermes Trismegistus. But they also meet Aleister Crowley, who is playing chess with another famous occultist, Austin Osman Spare. Sophie and Barbara are directed towards route 27, over which they reach Netzach (“Victory”), the Venusian

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37 *Promethea* # 12.



realm, where they find themselves literally drowning in a sea of love and deep emotions. Having climbed ashore, on route 24 they meet the figure of Death, who attacks and seems to kill them, but in fact kills only their earthly attachments, worldly ideas, and petty emotions. They make it to Tiphereth (“beauty, harmony”), the realm of the Self, where Barbara meets her own Higher Self or “Holy Guardian Angel,” in the shape of her own 15-year old persona.

Through route 22, the three travel on to Geburah (“Strength, Stern Judgment”), a fiery red landscape that functions like a kind of purgatory. Here they get trapped in the demonic Qlippoth or world of the Shells, from which they escape only by learning to treat the presiding demon Asmodeus with respect instead of anger and hatred. Over route 19 they reach Chesed (“Mercy”), a cloudy blue world that smells like cedar incense and is described as “the Fatherland.” Here Sophie is reunited with the father of the entire myth, the Hermetic magus of Alexandria who had sent his daughter into the desert, where she was saved by Thoth-Hermes and became the “living story” Promethea. But Sophie is also reunited with her physical father, who had left her mother when she was pregnant. Sophie is now divested of her Promethea persona and has to continue the journey as no one but herself.

The lower seven sephiroth are separated from the upper three by an abyss, known as the “invisible” eleventh sphere of Daath: no route leads from the fourth sphere of Chesed to the third sphere of Binah. Sophie and Barbara

therefore have to literally jump into the abyss. It is in the dreadful sphere of Daath that, among other things, they witness Crowley and Victor Neuberg in the midst of their infamous “Choronzon working,” through which Crowley allegedly “sacrificed himself” through ritual sodomy with his partner Victor Neuberg.<sup>38</sup> They finally reach Binah (“Understanding”), a place filled with holiness, where Sophie dons a new and more splendid set of “Promethea” garments.

They meet the “benevolent adepts” headed by none else than the Elizabethan magus John Dee. He leads them towards the awesome figure of the Eternal Feminine, who encompasses the entire spectrum of female energies from the biblical Whore of Babylon to the Madonna or virginal Mother Mary. Over route 14 they reach Chokmah (“Wisdom”), dominated by her counterpart, the masculine divine energy. This visit culminates in a vision of the primal sexual act as the origin of creation, in the form of the god Pan having sex with the goddess Selene. This mythological scene culminates in a cosmic orgasm that signifies the Big Bang, with Barbara exclaiming in amazement “I just came. *Everything* just came.”<sup>39</sup>

Finally, they ascend route 11, a spiraling “stairway to heaven” that leads into the ineffable sphere of Keter (“Crown”). In this sphere of ultimate unity, all words and concepts become meaningless, and we see Sophie and Barbara shifting in and out of existence and conscious experience. In this place of ultimate unification, Barbara is reunited at last with her deceased husband Steven, and the two are transformed into a kind of mythical Adam and Eve. In other words: once having reached the end of their quest, they have gone back to The Beginning.

So what next? The only way forward leads into the world of matter once again. As Steven explains,

When we climb up the tree winding from sphere to sphere, then we’re *serpents*. The serpent is the will to climb, and rise. The will to *live*. But when we choose to descend from this sacred purity, back into the turmoil and suffering of the world, then we’re *doves*. The dove is the will to sacrifice, to descend. The will to *die*. The will to die to this glorious world of *spirit*, and live again in *matter*. The will to take a little more *light* back down into the world, where it *needs* it.<sup>40</sup>

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38 See Owen 2004, 198.

39 *Promethea* # 22.

40 *Promethea* # 23.



We should note the reversal of common assumptions that is implied here: in line with basic Platonic mythology, leaving the material world behind is a movement towards *life*, while moving back into the world of matter, out of compassion for suffering humanity, means a sacrificial *death*. In short: pure spirit is true life, pure matter is death. Sophie and her companions decide to take the plunge downwards and descend back into the world as spiritual light-bringers.

### The End of the World

With this incarnational plunge downwards, we enter the third and final, apocalyptic part of the cycle. To understand it, we need to move back for a moment to *Promethea* # 5, where Sophie is in conversation with Margaret, her initiator into the mysteries of Compassion. Margaret explained why their enemies are afraid of Sophie: it is because she represents the fact that *anyone* can travel from the material world into the world of Immaterialia.

Promethea makes people more *aware* of this vast immaterial realm. Maybe tempts them to *explore* it. Imagine if too many people followed where she led? It would be like the great *Devonian* leap, from *sea* to *land*. Humanity slithering up the beach, from *one* element into *another*. From *matter* to *mind*. We have many names for this event. We call it “the *rapture*.” We call it “the opening of the 32<sup>nd</sup> path.” We call it the *Awakening*, or the *Revelation*, or the *Apocalypse*. But “End of the World” will do.<sup>41</sup>

When Sophie responds “Uhh, but . . . the end of the *world*. That’s a *bad* thing, right?” we are given a quick view of the horrors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Margaret responds to Sophie’s question:

Is it? “The world” isn’t the *planet*, or the life and people *on* it. The world is our systems, our politics, our economies . . . our ideas of the world. It’s our flags and our banknotes and our border wars. I was at *Ypres*. I was at the *Somme*. I say end this filthy mess *now*.<sup>42</sup>

And that is what happens in the third and final part of the *Promethea* cycle. Alan Moore picks up the thread a few years after Sophie’s travel through the

41 *Promethea* # 5.

42 *Promethea* # 5.

*Sefirotic* spheres and her plunge back into earth. It is 2003, world news is dominated by the war in Iraq, and Sophie seems to have forgotten everything that happened to her. Once having returned to earth, she had barely managed to escape arrest by the FBI. As Margaret had pointed out to her earlier, the powers of this world

have a vested interest in keeping the world as it is, because that's the world they have power over. You see, in the Imateria, there's no rent, no tax, no property. There's no real estate, no boundary fences, no limits.<sup>43</sup>

Promethea had been framed in the popular media as a dangerous terrorist, and all her friends have been imprisoned. Sophie barely managed to escape arrest herself, and is now living incognito with her boyfriend. But when the authorities finally discover her identity, she has no choice but to become Promethea once more, and this time she sets out to actually “end the world.” Having traveled through all the *Sefirotic* spheres up to divine unity, she is now in full command of all her powers. For instance, when the cops try to shoot her, the bullets turn into butterfly moths—an explicit reference to the Promethea moth, symbol of transformation, and to Frederick Myers on the *imago* or “perfect insect.”<sup>44</sup>

With Promethea flying above New York like a radiant angel, the consciousness of its inhabitants begins to be altered in strange and unpredictable ways. Time no longer seems to flow in a linear direction; solid things become fluid; reality shifts into hyper-reality; three-dimensional figures or objects turn into two-dimensional comic strips; people are swept away by radical psychedelic visions and no longer know where they are; and so on. Interspersed with these radical events are blocks of lyric prose commentary that further heightens the alienating sense of imagination encroaching upon reality:

Suddenly we were all exactly who we were, for better or worse, and then the President announced more troops were needed in Iraq and we kept catching ourselves in the mirror, recognizing something, something shining under the familiar crease and contour of our faces, this unique light of our mythical, our holy personalities, each of us singular, each unrepeatable in the immensity of Spacetime and right there we all remembered we were real, were lovers, gods or friends in our own burning sagas so we cried “What are those dreary yards that we have built? What lives are

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43 *Promethea* # 5.

44 Myers 1903, xviii; and cf *Promethea* # 32 about the Promethea moth, *Callosamia promethea*.

these that drape us gray like shrouds?" and understood we were all heroes in our souls.<sup>45</sup>

This final section of *Promethea* is all about Alan Moore's personal vision of the apocalyptic "end of time" that, in countercultural esotericism, has been referred to by such terms as Omega Point, Timewave Zero, the Rapture, or the Singularity: a radical shift of global consciousness that many representatives of the contemporary spiritual counterculture expected would occur on the 21st of December 2012.<sup>46</sup>

These forms of contemporary millenarianism are the direct reflection of a radical countercultural critique directed against what is sometimes referred to as "the Society of the Spectacle" and its alienating effects on the human mind. The term was coined by Guy Debord originally in 1967<sup>47</sup> and has been widely adopted in anarchist and radical counter-cultural spiritual milieus. It refers precisely to the kind of life-world pictured as "New York" in Alan Moore's work: a society dominated entirely by "interlocking communications technology, mass media, and corporate control," in which "the simulacra of mass communications and advertising fill all available social space."<sup>48</sup> When *Promethea* "brings the world to its end," Moore does not mean that she is putting an end to the planet, but to this artificial world of global Capitalist consumerism.

So how is it done? Towards the end of the cycle, we find *Promethea* sitting in a room next to a cozy fireside, addressing the reader directly:

Yes, *Promethea's* a fiction. Nobody ever claimed otherwise. I never lied. I'm at least an honest fiction. A true fiction. A fiction that can enter your dreams, possess her creators, talk through them to you. I'm an idea. But I'm a *real* idea. I'm the idea of the human *imagination* . . . which, when you think about it, is the only thing we can really be certain *isn't* imaginary.<sup>49</sup>

Ultimately, she points out, nothing exists except "a funny little twist of amino-acids, playing a marvelous game of pretend."<sup>50</sup> The entire story of the universe is just a story told by the fireside. In the end, nothing really exists except the Reader and *Promethea*—or in other words, *Mind* and *Imagination*. These two

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45 *Promethea* # 28.

46 Braden et al. 2007; cf Hanegraaff 2010.

47 Debord 2000.

48 Sellars 2010, 85.

49 *Promethea* # 31.

50 *Promethea* # 31.

have been together “since this room was a cave,” and together they have created our world:

Do you remember? When you first thought you saw things in the flames, in the dancing shadows . . . and you needed me to tell you a tale. A story grand and glorious.<sup>51</sup>

So this is what the whole of reality is: a story told by the fireside, an infinite play of the imagination experienced by the human mind. The room slowly gets dark, and we read Promethea’s final words: “stay awake.”

### Hermetic Gnosis

While the story of Promethea begins and ends there, the comics strip does not. In a first epilogue, we discover that life just goes on after the Apocalypse, only a little different. This is because “Everybody had the revelation, but not everybody understood it, or took any notice of it”.<sup>52</sup> What seems to be implied here is very similar to how the “coming of the New Age” was understood already by some pioneering New Age authors in the 1970s, notably David Spangler.<sup>53</sup> Here the “end of time” stood for a global spiritual transformation that would, however, be perceived only by those with the right “attunement,” those who were ready for it. As for all the others—those who had not yet been able to transcend their old, inherited, limited and limiting patterns of imagining reality—, they would remain trapped in the same world they had always known, because it was the only world they were capable of perceiving and understanding.

In a second epilogue, finally, our three-dimensional world has been left behind entirely. A naked goddess Promethea is addressing her readers not from the perspective of any particular world created by human consciousness, but from the perspective of consciousness itself. What Moore seems to have in mind here is very similar to the “Devachanic Plane” of modern Theosophy.<sup>54</sup> We see Promethea freely flying or swimming through multiple dimensions and energies, depicted in swirling colours, while she gives the reader a final overview of the underlying philosophy, full of references to quantum physics and neuroscience and to favorite authors of the spiritual counterculture such as

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51 *Promethea* # 31.

52 *Promethea* # 31.

53 See Hanegraaff 1996/1998, 354–355.

54 Leadbeater 1896.

Aldous Huxley, Julian Jaynes, Carl Gustav Jung, Robert Anton Wilson, Robert Graves, Harold Morowitz, Douglas Hofstadter, and so on. Since the universal “cosmic memory” is supposed to be located on the Devachanic Plane, it is perhaps fitting that this final issue of *Promethea* amounts to a glimpse of Moore’s bibliography or list of basic references for anybody who wants to continue exploring his ideas.<sup>55</sup>

Finally, *Promethea* # 32 is the ultimate example of a secret concealed behind the surface. If one pulls the pages apart they can be reconfigured into a double-sided poster with two large images of *Promethea*; and the spherical captions on each page turn out to be linked through trails of stars or ankh symbols, resulting in “a network of hypertextual rhizomes that bound around the picture plane unfettered by either page-by-page reading order or the visual rhetoric of the *Promethea* portraits.”<sup>56</sup>

Alan Moore’s myth of *Promethea* is clearly focused on the attainment of *gnosis*; but to be more specific about what this means to him, it may be useful to compare his work to another influential work of popular Gnostic fiction produced in the same year 1999. The central concept of the movie *The Matrix* by the Wachowsky brothers is that we are imprisoned in a computer-generated illusion called the Matrix, and need to “wake up” to reality as it really is. As many commentators have noted, this message is formulated explicitly as an update of “classic” gnostic dualism.<sup>57</sup> In the words of the super-hacker Morpheus, during his first meeting with the main protagonist Neo, the matrix is “the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth.” It was made by demonic powers (the demiurge and the archons, represented in the movie as “the Architect” and hosts of “Men in Black”) who are trying to keep us enslaved through cultivating ignorance—absence of *gnosis*—about our true condition.

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55 Moore mentions (here in alphabetical order) Dead Sea Scrolls specialist and mushroom mythographer John Allegro (*The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross*); writer John Kendrick Bangs; Feminist writer Helene Cixous (*Le livre de Promethea*); Occultist Aleister Crowley; physicist Albert Einstein; physicist Murray Gell-Man (“Information Gathering and Utilizing Systems”, or IGUS’s); writer Robert Graves; physicist Werner Heisenberg; cognitive scientist Douglas Hofstadter (*Gödel, Escher, Bach*); writer Aldous Huxley (*The Doors of Perception*); psychologist Julian Jaynes (*The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*); writer James Joyce (*Finnegan’s Wake*); psychologist Carl Gustav Jung; composer Claudio Monteverdi; biophysicist Harold Morowitz; ethnobotanist Jeremy Narby (*The Cosmic Serpent*); occultist and artist Austin Osman Spare; visionary theosopher Emanuel Swedenborg; and discordian writer Robert Anton Wilson.

56 Fischer 2005, 126.

57 See Flannery-Dailey & Wagner 2001; and the chapter on *The Matrix* in DeConick 2016.

Interestingly, Moore's final message is different in a subtle but important sense. Whereas *The Matrix* begins significantly with the call to "Wake Up," *Promethea* ends (no less significantly) with the words "Stay Awake." Ultimately, Moore's work is not so much about waking up from the illusion of the world but about staying awake to what really exists and who we really are. In other words, Moore's story is not about escaping from the prison of the world but, rather, about realizing that there is no prison except the one that we create for ourselves through our own imagination. Sure enough, similar interpretations of "imprisonment" or "delusion" can be found in *The Matrix* as well (most obviously in the famous "there is no spoon" scene); and yet, although it might be possible to reconcile the underlying philosophies, the emphases are different. In a structural and typological sense, I would suggest, the *Promethea* cycle can be seen as a *Hermetic* panentheist or cosmotheist<sup>58</sup> alternative to classic understandings of "Gnostic" dualism. The difference lies precisely in the role of the imagination. Although Moore does not call attention to it, *Corpus Hermeticum* XI contains a doctrine that would seem to be tailor-made for him:

All is within God; but not as if lying in a place. . . . Within God everything lies in bodiless imagination. Reflect on God in this way as having all within Himself as ideas: the cosmos, Himself, the whole. If you do not make yourself equal to God you cannot understand Him. Like is understood by like. Grow to immeasurable size. Be free from every body, transcend all time. Become eternity and thus you will understand God. Suppose nothing to be impossible for yourself. Consider yourself immortal and able to understand everything: all arts, sciences and the nature of every living creature. Become higher than all heights and lower than all depths. . . . Conceive yourself to be in all places at the same time: in earth, in the sea, in heaven; that you are not yet born, that you're within the womb, that you are young, old, dead; that you are beyond death. Conceive all things at once: times, places, actions, qualities and quantities; then you can understand God.<sup>59</sup>

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58 Whereas "pantheism" means that God and the world are identical, "panentheism" means rather that they are inseparably interwoven (Hanegraaff 2013a, 71, 78, 115–116). The closely equivalent term "cosmotheism" was coined by Lamoignon de Malesherbes in 1782 and popularized by Jan Assmann (see Hanegraaff 2012, 371–373, 376–378).

59 Corp. herm. 11.18–20 (trans. Salaman et al. 1999, 57–58).

According to this Hermetic perspective, the world does not stand over against God but, on the contrary, exists in (or as) God's imagination (*fantasia* according to the Greek original). Therefore, it is only through the imagination that human beings can become godlike and actually participate in the mind of God, thereby achieving divine *gnosis* in the most literal and radical sense.

Accordingly, it is not the world that must be rejected or from which human beings need to escape—"ending the world" does not mean destroying the matrix. Moore's message is more positive. It is about staying awake to the true nature of our own selves as omnipotent divine creators who have the power to create our own world as beautifully as we wish. From that perspective, "ending the world" means unmasking the Spectacle as the negative counterpart of what the imagination could and should be—an empty and soulless world of mere simulacra, sentimental and mechanical mass-produced images that belittle and limit the divine powers of the mind, impoverished surrogates of what creativity really means.

Alan Moore's *Promethea* is significant for several reasons. First, it is one of the most impressive and philosophically consistent manifestoes of a new kind of esotericism that is rapidly developing and spreading in popular culture at present, especially among younger people, both online and offline. Second, it is an excellent example of "fiction-based religion" that both reflects *and* theorizes the rapidly dissolving boundary between "fiction" and "reality" in popular media culture. Third, it exemplifies the subversive potential of popular comics, as its ultimate objective is to break the spell of corporate control and capitalist consumerism on which the genre nevertheless depends for reaching its audience. Fourth, it presents a "Hermetic" alternative to Hans Jonas' classic reading of "Gnosticism" as both a product of and a revolt against alienation and nihilist despair. Fifth and last, it provides its readers with some serious food for thought concerning the nature and the role of the imagination in shaping our culture, our society, and our everyday life.

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