

"And That's Immortality":

Metafiction and the Importance of Contexts and Co-texts in Neil Gaiman's Short Stories

In a contemporary literary context that tends to increase the opportunities for dialogue between media, the speculative fiction writer Neil Gaiman stands out as an emblematic figure. However various in terms of media and literary genre, his creations consistently share common ground in their concern for metafictional issues, a concern which is particularly striking in his short stories. Drury, for instance, has demonstrated how Gaiman utilizes "familiar stories from the fairy tale tradition in a manner that self-consciously highlights their relationship to the act of storytelling as a creatively generative process" (110). As Dowd underlined in an essay on metafiction and storytelling, Gaiman's fictional worlds are also "populated by writers, film directors, puppet masters, actors, oral storytellers, and even a king of stories who rules a realm of fictions, fables, and dreams" (103). If this focus on metafictional issues appears quite clearly in some short stories, it reaches its peak in a celebration of stories and storytelling when the multiple contexts of these texts are taken into account.

Gaiman established his status as a writer "of critical and cultural importance" (Eveleth & Wigard 8) with his *Sandman* (1989-1996) and is one of the most prolific writers of the late-twentieth and twenty-first century (Sommers vii). Though critics have been increasingly interested in his novels and comics since the 2010s, his non-fiction, his collections of short stories and his numerous other works have not received equivalent attention. As Porter underlines, Gaiman's work has "never been limited to one culture, time period, franchise, story world, or medium" (15); he is an author "unbridled by the shackles of boundaries" (Sommers viii). Not only does Gaiman create a wide variety of works in different media, but he also creates strong connections between these works, thus challenging the stories' boundaries by enriching the core texts through re-editions which multiply the co-texts as well as through the creation of illustrated versions, graphic novels, audio-books, public readings, and non-fiction texts, all of which stretch the perimeter of the story further out. In some cases, these strategies of intermediality go further and expand towards strategies of transmediality, or transmedia storytelling, as defined by Jenkins (95-96):

A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole. In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best – so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics.

In the case of *Neverwhere*, for instance, Gaiman wrote a scenario for a television series (BBC Two, 1996) that he transformed into a novel (1996), which inspired in its turn a nine-issue comic book limited series (Vertigo, 2005) and a radio dramatisation (BBC Radio 4, 2013). Gaiman subsequently extended the story by writing a short story as a sequel ("How the Marquis Got His Coat Back", 2014) and is currently writing a novel that expands its storyworld (*The Seven Sisters*). His novels *American Gods* (2001) and *Anansi Boys* (2005) share one character, Mr Nancy, as well as a general setting and a strong focus on gods and myths from all around the world.

This imaginative expansion or "dissemination" (Camus 93) dear to Gaiman is particularly in consonance with the contemporary pop-cultural literary context. Though intermedial,

intramedial and transmedial expansions have occurred "since the beginning of storytelling" (Harvey 42), they appear to be "particularly widespread in contemporary culture" (Ryan & Thon 3), where the development of the digital provides new channels for literature and induces an acceleration of process and an expansion in accessibility (Harvey 42). This intensification of intermedial and transmedial tendencies is especially acute in speculative fiction (Harvey, 1), a dominant literary mode in Gaiman's work, and is particularly conspicuous in the work of other contemporary speculative fiction writers such as Daniel Handler, J.K. Rowling and George R. R. Martin, who tend to create storyworlds and expand them in a multitude of media and texts. What distinguishes the intermedial and transmedial strategies of these writers from the ones implemented by literary franchises is the fact that authors like Gaiman tend to retain control over most of the storyworld expansions, either by creating them by themselves, or by engaging in tight or loose collaborations, or by commenting on them in their non-fiction.

In this type of literary context, the question of co-texts and other contexts becomes highly relevant. Gaiman's tendency to disseminate his stories in a multitude of pieces invites his readers to pay attention, when reading a text, to everything that surrounds it, and to keep their eyes open to the connections that it establishes with other pieces of fiction and non-fiction within the author's complete oeuvre. Beyond expanding storyworlds, these connections are all the more important in that they participate in bringing to light, in an unrivalled manner, overarching topics in Gaiman's work – such as metafictional issues.

The metafictional issues which pervade many of Gaiman's stories are dealt with through a wide variety of themes and motifs. Most of them appear to be quite recurrent, and some are very explicit, such as the figure of the narrator as a writer (*The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, *The Facts in the Case of the Departure of Miss Finch*), the boundary between fiction, reality and truth (*American Gods*), and open intertextuality ("The Man Who Forgot Ray Bradbury"). Others are more implicit, such as the motif of immortality that prevails in the short stories "Feeders and Eaters" (1990) and "Troll Bridge" (1993). In these two stories, Gaiman proceeds to sets about desacralizing human immortality in order then to (re)sacralise the immortality of stories and storytelling. In this paper, I will show how taking into account the multiple contexts of these two short stories takes these metafictional considerations to their apogee, each way of dealing with a specific context leading to a different level of celebration of stories and storytelling.

"Troll Bridge"

Neil Gaiman's "Troll Bridge" (1993) is a rewriting of the traditional fairy tale "Three Billy Goats Gruff"¹. In this short story, while keeping the typical "eat-me-when-I-am-fatter" plot, Gaiman drastically alters not only the action and perspectives of the tale, but also its ending. In his version, a young boy of seven, who is also the narrator, wanders under a bridge and encounters a troll who wants to "eat" his life (62). The boy manages to escape by arguing that there would be more of him to eat were he to come back when he is older. When he comes back to the bridge by accident eight years later, he first suggests that the troll eat his best friend instead, and then escapes a second time by promising again to come back later. One day, after many years, his steps and despair lead him to the bridge one final time, and the narrator

ultimately allows the troll to devour his life. By doing so, they actually end up switching places: the troll leaves with the narrator's carnal envelope, and the narrator takes his place as a troll under the bridge and refuses to come out again. In this short story, the narrator's acquisition of immortality is prepared throughout the text and settled in the end in a way that depicts it as corrupting and alienating. As a counterpoint, language and stories are celebrated, particularly when the co-text and paratext of the story are closely examined.

"Troll bridge" initially displays a dichotomic, typically fairy-tale-like treatment of motifs, which gradually unfolds as more porous and nuanced. The very first word of the short story, "they" ("They pulled up most of the railway tracks in the early sixties" 59), lacks precision and already establishes a distance between the narrator and his external surroundings, which will be characteristic of his relationship to the world – he will later be depicted as a self-centred and selfish man, who suggests that the troll takes the life of the girl he "thought" he "loved" (66) instead of his own ("Don't take me. I don't want to die. Take *Her*" 65). The initial duality of the story also appears in the conventional binary opposition between "day" and "night" ("the night was full of ghosts and witches (...). Daylight was always safe" 60), as well as in the distinction between the "real" and the "unreal". Although the story begins with metaphors that point to the importance of fantasy for the protagonist, who describes a train from his past as "panting and steaming like a black iron dragon" (59), he quickly apologizes for his belief as a youth that "all empty houses were haunted" (60): "It is not that I was credulous, simply that I believed in all things dark and dangerous" (60). These binary oppositions, however, soon crumble to make way for less clear-cut categories. In order to reach the bridge, home to an unlikely troll, the protagonist has to travel a disused railway line that acts as a progressive transition from the real world to the unreal. Though "the path never changed", "the countryside around it" (61) gradually did, to the point that the narrator thought he "was in fairyland" (60).

The fantasy thus begins to permeate reality and vice versa. This increasingly porous quality of the text is reflected in the relationship between the troll and the narrator, whose ultimate identity switch is already foreshadowed in the earlier stages of the text. At the beginning of the short story, the reader is invited to identify with the narrator, who is described as a young innocent boy "exploring" (60) his surrounding with his "sense of curiosity" (61) and gladly confiding in the reader ("my earliest reliable memory" 59), and also as a "reader" himself (59). The troll, on the other hand, is first depicted as a nightmarish creature ("he was all my nightmares given flesh" 62) who threatens to "eat" the narrator's life (62). The initial sense of identification with the narrator, however, is bound to change. The latter loses all connotation of innocence when he tries to exchange his friend's life to save his own ("She's an innocent (...). You're not. I don't want her. I want you" 66), and when he exposes matter-of-factly to the reader his multiple secret affairs in London at a time when he was married and father to a toddler. The troll, by contrast, is progressively humanized: the last time he meets the narrator, his eyes are "wide and lonely", he is "trembling", he "whisper[s]" in a "small, scared voice" (69) and awaits the narrator's consent before eating his life:

He was trembling. I held out my hand and took his huge clawed paw in mine. I smiled at him. 'It's okay,' I told him. 'Honestly. It's okay.' The troll nodded. (69)

This progressive metaphorical switch between the troll and the narrator thus culminates at the end of the short story, when they actually exchange their identities. When the troll ultimately eats the narrator's life "with his strong sharp teeth" (69), he is free to leave, now "wearing" the narrator's "life comfortably" (69), walking "back" the exact same way the narrator "had come" (69). The narrator, for his part, becomes the troll under the bridge. This acquisition of immortality is a result of a contamination caused by the devouring mouth of the troll ("he raised his head, and opened his mouth, and ate my life" 69), and it is suffused with a strong sexual connotation:

He pushed me to the ground, onto the leaves and the wrappers and the condom, and lowered himself on top of me. Then he raised his head, and opened his mouth, and ate my life with his strong sharp teeth. When he was finished, the troll stood up and brushed himself down. (69)

This sexual element is evident as early as the first meeting between the narrator and the troll: "he was naked, and his penis hung from the bush of gonk hair between his legs" (62). This description is both shocking, because unannounced by the text which until then has built a register of innocence associated with the narrator, and at the same time quite incongruous, since the ending suggests that becoming a troll is the result of buccal contamination and not viviparous reproduction. As a result, the focus on the troll's genitalia and the sexual register appears to significantly complicate the notion of life consumption. In this short story, being granted access to immortality is not a simple, clean process: it is shocking, disturbingly intimate, almost taboo, and somehow amounts to a form of identity rape. Such a dark depiction of human immortality corroborates the imagery that arises from the aforementioned porosity between the troll and the narrator. To become immortal, the latter has to become someone else, and to leave behind every single part of his former life and history: immortality leads to a forfeiture of identity and is depicted in terms of loss. To an English-speaking reader, the association between the story outline and its title "Troll Bridge" is most likely to conjure a reference to the so-called "toll" bridges, where a toll (or monetary charge) is required to cross over. In Gaiman's story, becoming a troll is the heavy toll one has to pay to reach immortality. Far from a reward, immortality is ultimately described as a state of purgatory, "in the darkness under the arch" (70), "Hiding. Waiting. Part of the bridge" (69).

The desacralisation of human immortality in this text appears as a counterpoint to, and thus accentuates, a celebration of language that eventually elicits a celebration of the immortality of stories. The metafictional aspect of the text as such is fairly subtle and implicit. As Waugh defines it,

Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. (2)

The explicit metafictional comments in "Troll Bridge" are few. When the narrator first encounters the troll in this rewriting of a fairy tale, he ironically suggests that "it is good for children to find themselves facing the elements of a fairy tale – they are well equipped to deal with these" (62). This *mise en abyme* effect is followed by a straightforward equivalence between reading and living: "I haven't lived at all yet. There are books I haven't read yet" (63).

But mostly, and more elegantly, metafiction in "Troll Bridge" flourishes as a consequence of the poetic dimension of the troll's language. This dimension is foregrounded as soon as the troll appears for the first time:

There was a troll waiting for me, under the bridge. "I'm a troll", he said. Then he paused, and added, more or less as an afterthought, "Fol rol de ol rol." (61)

The formulaic "fol rol de ol rol", which appears at the beginning of the first encounter between the narrator and the troll and then closes their last meeting, refers to a traditional nonsense word in English ("folderol") that is also used to refer to a trivial thing of little value. In terms of denotation, this syntagm seems of little importance in the text. It could thus be considered as a simple reminder of the fairy tale register that the short story originates from. However, Gaiman's tendency to subvert the characteristics of the fairy tale tradition in this story undermines such a natural explanation: far from inhabiting the usual temporal and spatial haziness typical in fairy tales, "Troll Bridge" is rooted in a very specific setting, in a little town near London in the early sixties (59). The narration shifts to the first person, and the text abounds with trivia unusual in the fairy tale register. In such a context, the formulaic "fol rol de ol rol" becomes rather conspicuous. Its rhyming quality, coupled with the troll's initial and spontaneous need to repeat the endings of stressed syllables in end positions (I'm a *troll* / Fol *rol* de ol *rol*), deploys from the outset a poetic dimension in the troll's language that is reinforced by the natural imagery summoned in his discourse ("rainbows", "stars", "dreams" 62) and that results in a somewhat magical connection between words. At the same time, however, the dismissive connotation of "folderol" (a thing of nothing) and its use in the refrain of some old popular ballads and songs trivializes this magical dimension. The troll's language, in Gaiman's text, is a place where the fairy tale reference is concurrently expounded and unravelled – it becomes a power centre. Its poetic dimension is all the more palpable in that the troll makes deliberate use of anaphora in his discourse. The syntagm "eat your life" appears no less than three times during their brief first encounter (62), and then gives way to a more elaborate form of repetition:

"Trolls can smell the rainbows, trolls can smell the stars," it whispered sadly. "Trolls can smell the dreams you dreamed before you were even born" (62)

Even the slightest event has to be materialized by the troll on a linguistic level ("I heard you trip-trapping over my bridge. And now I'm going to eat your life" 62). Language, in "Troll Bridge", is not just a means to relate a story; it is highly relevant to the story itself. It is thus particularly significant that, in the end, if the narrator becomes immortal through a process of buccal contamination, the contamination also takes place on a poetic level. One of the very last thoughts of the narrator, once he has become a troll, is precisely the formulaic expression that opened the initial encounter with his predecessor:

Fol rol de ol rol. I'm just going to stay here, in the darkness under the arch. I can hear you all out there, trip-trapping, trip-trapping over my bridge. Oh yes, I can hear you. But I'm not coming out.

Such an ending confers on the text a cyclical aspect, the text coming full circle both in its motifs (a troll forever waiting under the bridge) and on a linguistic level ("fol rol de ol rol"). Thus the story can begin again, and again, and continue its own cycle of immortality.

It thus appears that the troll's mouth, in "Troll Bridge", is simultaneously the vector of contamination that infects the narrator with alienating immortality, and the means by which the everlasting motion of the story itself is celebrated. The presence of such a metafictional process in "Troll Bridge", however subtle and implicit, is reinforced by the context of the short story – and could even be seen, in some cases, as entirely depending on it.

"Troll Bridge" was initially published in *Snow White, Blood Red*, edited by Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling. This anthology, published in 1993, collects together 20 short stories which reinvent classic fairy tales such as "The Frog King", "Rapunzel", or "Snow White". In this collection, which focuses entirely on the fairy tale tradition, the occurrence of "fol rol de ol rol" might be interpreted as a simple reference to the typical formulaic structures found in such texts. Since repetition constitutes one of the characteristics of fairy tales as well, the same could be said regarding the presence of both the simple and more elaborate anaphora found in the troll's discourse. Such a reading, based on the insertion of "Troll Bridge" in a more general fairy tale rewriting context and disregarding Gaiman's typical interest in metafictional matters, would considerably impede the perception of metafiction as a central issue in this short story. The motif of metafiction reaches its full potential when the text is read in the context of Gaiman's own collections of short stories, since "Troll Bridge" was later published in *Smoke and Mirrors* (1999), and then in *M is for Magic* (2007).

In *Smoke and Mirrors*, "Troll Bridge" is directly preceded by "The Price", a short story in which the narrator shelters a stray black cat who turns up every morning in a worse physical state than the day before. The narrator eventually decides to spy on him to understand the cause of his injuries and soon discovers that the cat spends every night on the porch, fighting an incarnation of the Devil to prevent it from entering the house and causing harm to its inhabitants. Regarding this short story, two elements are worth mentioning in the present context. First, the text is written in the first person, unlike the two first short stories of the collection that directly precede it, but like "Troll Bridge", which directly follows. Secondly, the narrator is a writer (52). It is customary for Gaiman to write a small introductory text for each one of his stories once they are published in a collection; and since he takes care not to spoil their ending in these texts, it is not uncommon for the readership familiar with his work to systematically read them before turning to the short stories. In the introductory text he wrote for "The Price" in *Smoke and Mirrors*, Gaiman adds a long parenthesis that is particularly striking:

(For the curious: Eventually a young lady fell in love with the Black Cat, and he went to live with her, and the last time I saw him he was the size of a very small mountain lion, and for all I know he's growing still. Two weeks after the Black Cat left, a brown tabby arrived and moved onto the porch. As I write this, he's asleep on the back of the sofa a few feet away from me.) (20)

Gaiman then adds a last paragraph in which he thanks his family "for letting [him] put them in this story" (20). In a playful blurring of boundaries typical of Gaiman's writing (Eveleth & Wigard 6), it becomes very difficult to distinguish the facts from the fiction: surely an incarnation of the

Devil does not wait on his porch every night, but was there ever a black cat in the author's house? What about the implied role of the new tabby cat, if it exists at all? Gaiman's whimsical association between writer and narrator in this short story and its introduction is bound to reflect on the reader's perception of "Troll Bridge" if it is read directly after "The Price" – and the sudden apparition of a first person narrator in both these stories is likely to reinforce the conflation of author and narrator.

The subsequent publication of "Troll Bridge" in *M is For Magic* consistently furthers its metafictional aspect. In this collection, Gaiman gathers texts previously published in other collections and media, and dedicates them this time to a younger readership. His introduction takes the form of a comparatively long flowing text in which he talks about his reading habits when he was a child, and tackles the question of the importance of books, of fiction and of short stories for young audiences. In this introduction, he presents "Troll Bridge" right after "Instructions", a highly metafictional poem:

The stories here will take you (...) from a poem about how to behave if you find yourself in a fairy tale to a story about a boy who runs into a troll beneath a bridge and the bargain they make. (xi)

What is the most striking is that in both *Smoke and Mirrors* and *M is for Magic*, "Troll Bridge" (TB) is directly followed by "Don't Ask Jack" (DAJ). In this very short story of about 750 words, Gaiman narrates the story of a jack-in-the-box that the children of the house avoid as much as possible, though they continually tell "each other stories about Jack" (DAJ 72). The story quickly develops a very creepy atmosphere that inevitably reminds one of "Troll Bridge":

For each of the children, separately, remembered walking alone in the moon's blue light (...) up to the nursery. It was almost like sleep-walking (...). Remembered opening the treasure chest, pawing through the dolls and the clothes and pulling out the box. And then the child would touch the catch, and the lid would open (...), and Jack came out. Not with a pop and a bounce: he was no spring-heeled Jack. But deliberately, intently, he would rise from the box and motion to the child to come closer, closer, and smile. And there in the moonlight, he told them each things they could never quite remember, things they were never able entirely to forget. (DAJ 72)

As this extract shows, the creepy atmosphere is not the only thing that "Troll Bridge" and "Don't Ask Jack" have in common. There is, in both texts, a use of anaphora that is particularly pronounced – the triple threat "eat your life" in the former is echoed in three cautious statements that "the children did not play with it" in the latter. Both texts refer to the same very specific motifs, such as trains in the first lines of the stories (TB 59, DAJ 72). Intertextuality is a particularly fertile technique in Gaiman's art, on many levels; thus, it is not rare to find implicit and explicit connections between his different works in these very works. There is, for instance, a clear reference to "October in the chair" in "Instructions", and both stories have been published together as well in *M is for Magic*. It is thus highly significant that the narrator in "Troll Bridge", the text that directly precedes "Don't Ask Jack" in both collections, is precisely named ... Jack (TB 62). Both stories thus end in a strikingly similar way: a malevolent, dangerous creature named Jack awaits in the darkness, under the bridge or "within the box within the box" (DAJ 73), "not coming out" (TB 70), waiting "for ever" (DAJ 73). In both texts, the story will not be allowed to end when the reader turns the page or closes the book: just like Jack, it will wait "for ever" for the next reader to come along. It will simply go back to its beginning, again and again, in an eternal celebration of the immortality of the stories we tell each other.

"Feeders and Eaters"

The dialectic of sacralisation and desacralisation of immortality that is found in "Troll Bridge", and its impact on metafictional issues, appears to be a recurrent storytelling strategy in Gaiman's short stories. The various aspects of its manifestation are strikingly similar in "Feeders and Eaters", where both the desacralisation of human immortality and the celebration of the immortality of stories are conveyed, once again, through the metaphor of the devouring mouth. In the case of this story, however, the metafictional aspect of the text is quite toned down in the short story version (as opposed to the graphic version), while the multiple contexts that surround it build a register of metafictional references that become increasingly difficult for the reader to ignore.

"Feeders and Eaters" tells the story of a man (the narrator, whose name remains unknown) who enters a café in the middle of the night and runs into an old friend, Edward (Eddie) Barrow, whom he has lost sight of for the last ten years. Eddie used to be a strong, handsome man, but now seems so sick that he is barely recognizable. Most of the action of the short story consists in Eddie recounting what happened to him during the last few years. After completing a contract, he stayed in town and rented one of the two rooms in the attic of a family. Miss Effie Corvier, the old woman with long, long hair who rented the adjacent room in the attic, soon began offering him unusual gifts, which made him feel quite uncomfortable. After the family cat, Thompson, went missing, Eddie heard strange noises coming one night from the old woman's bedroom. He entered the chamber and found the remains of the cat who, far beyond reason, was still alive; while the upper half of his body remained intact, the rest had been cleaned to the bone. Eddie soon discovered that the old woman had actually been feeding on the cat, leaving him barely alive enough to keep his flesh fresh. Eddie then recounts how he felt compelled to help the cat die, and how, discovering his deed, Miss Corvier blamed him for eating her fresh meat. At the end of his story, Eddie gets up to join a young woman with long, long hair waiting for him outside, and the narrator catches a glimpse of his decaying right hand, cleaned to the bone from its flesh.

In this story, the desacralisation of human immortality is achieved in two key ways, as indicated by the title: it is raised both by the portrayal of "eaters", in the person of Miss Corvier, and by the portrayal of "feeders", represented by Eddie Barrow and Thompson the cat.

The cannibalistic behaviour of Miss Corvier, which is more than suggested by the denouement of the story, has been subtly prepared in the course of Eddie's narration. When she offers him a handful of fresh shaggy inkcaps, a variety of mushrooms little known to consumers because they quickly deliquesce into a dark substance after being plucked, she alludes to other potential sources of food that people tend not to be aware of:

It's astonishing the things that people don't eat. All the things around them that people could eat, if only they knew it. (269)

Retrospectively, one understands that Miss Corvier probably hints at live food², be it animal or more specifically human, an inference which is strengthened by her plea for "fresh meat, and raw" (270). Her nature, that is to say her propensity to subsist on near-corpses, is also strongly implied by her family name, which is a recurring technique in Gaiman's work³. "Corvier" can be

read as a derivative of "corvid", or "corvidae", a family of birds comprising about 120 species, such as rooks, jays, crows and ravens, and whose natural diet is mainly omnivorous and includes carrion. From her first appearance, the connotation of Effie's family name thus endows her with the profile of a highly opportunistic scavenger. This dietary habit is implicitly indicated as the source of Effie's bodily regeneration. Thanks to the recurring pattern of long hair, the reader is invited to associate Eddie's old neighbour, Miss Corvier, with the young woman who awaits him outside the café at the end:

She looked so old. Wrinkled face, like an old, old monkey. But long hair, down to her waist, like a young girl. (268)

The woman waiting for him outside on the pavement couldn't have been much over thirty. She had long, long hair, though. (275)

Effie's regeneration, and thus immortality, is depicted as resulting from her consumption of live flesh⁴, and is conveyed just as in "Troll Bridge" by the metaphor of the devouring mouth. The violent and gruesome scenario confers a very dark connotation on this notion of immortality, which is also reinforced by the depiction of Effie as a witch-like figure, a woman "so old" and "wrinkled" who does not laugh but "cackles" (268), who possesses an erudite knowledge of little-known vegetation, and seems to have quickly gained an inexplicable power over Eddie:

It was like, I knew she wanted it, so I had to do it. I had no choice. (270)

As in "Troll Bridge", there is a sexual connotation to the acquisition of immortality through life consumption, as the ending of the story suggests a physical proximity between Eddie and the now young Effie when the narrator watches them walking "out of the café's light for all the world like a couple of teenagers who were just beginning to realise that they were in love" (276).

Beyond the nefarious association between life consumption, immortality and the "eater" that is Effie, the desacralisation of human immortality also surfaces in the representation of the "feeders", that is to say Thompson the cat and Eddie⁵. In their case, however, immortality should be less understood as the ability to live forever than as an inability to die ("*im*-mortality"). Effie, in a deployment of her witch-like abilities, insists on this deliberate though unnatural preservation of the cat's life:

He was all I had to keep me going, and you killed him. After all I've done, she says, making it so the meat stays fresh, so the life stays on. After all I've done. (274)

This temporary immortality, in the sense of the inability to die, is depicted as an abominable condition for the cat as well as for Eddie. This is particularly conveyed in the physical description of the half-eaten cat and of Eddie's hand⁶, and in the contrast with Eddie's former robustness⁷. Eddie and the cat are assimilated to each other in their distress, which is made visible in the similarity of their call for death through the imagery of pleading eyes:

It may have been a cat, but I knew what it wanted. It was in its eyes. (273)

'If you'd seen that cat, you would have done what I did. Anyone would have done.' He raised his head then, for the first time in his story, looked me in the eyes. I thought I saw an appeal for help in his eyes, something he was too proud to say aloud. (274)

Thus, and paradoxically enough, Thompson's and Eddie's singular immortality consists in a form of death in itself, which is made explicit when the narrator says of Eddie that "he looked worse than rough : he looked dead" (267). Just as in "Troll Bridge", human immortality is portrayed here as resulting from a process of contamination, and it is considered less a gift than a punishment, or a sort of purgatory.

Just as in "Troll Bridge", the desacralisation of human immortality in "Feeders and Eaters" appears as a counterpoint to, and thus accentuates, a celebration of language that eventually elicits a celebration of the immortality of stories. In this story too, however, the metafictional aspect of the text as such is fairly subtle and implicit when it is read as an isolated object.

Beyond the strategy of embedded narratives (Eddie's story within the narrator's), the text openly asks the question of the boundary between fiction and reality. The narrator opens his narrative by telling the reader that "this is a true story, pretty much. As far as that goes, and whatever good it does anybody" (266). As Sommers argues, it is not unusual⁸ for Gaiman to "conflat[e] reality and fantasy" (xxi), which is all the more tricky since the notion of truth, in most of his works of fiction and non-fiction, is typically treated as "a kind of sacred but malleable thing" (Eveleth 121). This merging of fiction and reality⁹ is considerably complicated by the fact that Gaiman's likely stories often involve the sudden emergence of elements of speculative fiction, while at the same time, very specific, concrete and trivial elements recurrently pervade the fantasy, which reasserts the likelihood of the story. Another metafictional strategy dear to Gaiman and apparent in "Feeders and eaters" consists in addresses to the reader¹⁰. The straightforward metafictional aspect of "Feeders and eaters" as an isolated short story is otherwise very limited.

A reader somewhat acquainted with Gaiman's fiction, however, knows that such an isolated reading is not particularly in line with the overall dynamics of his work. His literary strategies are typically guided by boundary-breaking (Eveleth & Wigard 6), with the result that Gaiman quickly became one of the "core, canonical authors in several fields of literary study" (3). With his active role in a contemporary literary field which is characterized by the expansion of intermedial and transmedial strategies, and with the constant dissemination of his stories through multiple channels, Gaiman makes it almost impossible for his readers to stay impervious to the various contexts of a given short story. His work becomes a constant invitation to build bridges and connections between his stories, no matter what media they are embedded in and irrespective of their fictional or non-fictional character¹¹. In the case of "Feeders and Eaters", taking this literary context into account is of paramount importance to the deciphering of the highly metafictional aspect of the short story. In this particular case, three types of contexts are crucial: the paratext of the short story, the co-text formed by its counterpart in another medium, and the direct co-text of this story in its comic version.

"Feeders and Eaters" was initially published as a one-shot comic in the magazine *Revolver Horror Special* (Fleetway, 1990, art by Mark Buckingham), and later¹² as a short story in *Keep Out the Night* (an anthology edited by Steve Jones, 2002). The comic version thus appears as the Urtext, or the main narrative from which the other one crossmedially springs (Harvey 7). However, these days, "Feeders and Eaters" in its comic form is far rarer and much harder to find than the short story, which was also included in Gaiman's second major collection of short

stories, *Fragile Things* (2006), and widely distributed¹³. It is thus very likely that most readers will first come across this story in its short story form. In a literary context marked by transmedial strategies, it is also likely that some readers will then turn to the comic version, as it is common for "the most committed consumers" of the work of transmedia artists to "track down data spread across multiple media, scanning each and every text for insights into the world" (Jenkins 95). Such readers will find in the comic version of "Feeders and Eaters" a few more explicit metafictional references than in the short story, such as a reinforcement of the aforementioned merging of fiction and reality, when the narrator concludes his story in the same fashion as it began ("That's what happened. Like I said before, it's a true story, pretty much. It really happened" 9). This, however, remains a detail compared to the overwhelmingly metafictional quality that the comic version of "Feeders and Eaters" develops through its graphic representation of the narrator, both in terms of actions (what the narrator actually does) and in terms of nature (who the narrator really is).

In the comic version of "Feeders and Eaters", a more subtle metafictional imagery is developed through an allegory of the devouring mouth, which was also primordial in the desacralisation of human immortality. Just as in the short story, this devouring mouth most obviously belongs to Effie Corvier¹⁴; but, and this is a major difference from the short story, it also belongs to the narrator. Beyond the panels offering close-ups on teeth whose owner it is difficult to identify (are they Effie's, Eddie's or the narrator's?), the cannibalistic disposition of the narrator is strongly suggested in the last page of the comic. The seventh and eighth of the nine panels show the hand of the narrator picking red bits from the table, and putting them in his mouth. For the reader who remembers the text of the short story, these reddish fragments could be inferred to come from "the black goo that had crusted around the neck of the ketchup bottle", which Eddie keeps "picking at" with "the finger of his left hand" (273). The spatial disposition of the panels on the last page, however, suggests otherwise: to the seventh, bottom-left panel showing the narrator's hand picking red bits on the table, responds the third, top right panel, showing Eddie's mutilated hand losing its own red bits of flesh. This association is accentuated by the fact that all the fragments are not only drawn so as to be aligned on the page, but also appear to be the only red and vivid colours in a series of panels otherwise dominated by blue and brown tones. As a result, the reader is invited to deduce that the red bits the narrator is eating quite casually are scraps of Eddie's mutilated hand, which makes of the narrator Effie Cordier's alter ego, an "eater" in the disturbing sense of the term. The story title, which puts "eaters" in the plural form, seems to corroborate this interpretation, as do the recurrent and unequivocal close-ups¹⁵ on the narrator's eating mouth (3, 6, 9). The narrator's cannibalistic disposition suggested by the comic becomes very difficult to ignore when going back to the short story version¹⁶, and feeds a new interpretation of the story.

The association between Effie Corvier and the narrator, which stems from their shared dietary preferences, attributes to the latter, by transitivity, an equal proneness to immortality. This potential immortality of the narrator is one of the two absolutely crucial keys to understanding how metafiction works in this story. The second key lies in the fact that, unlike the short story where the narrator is anonymised¹⁷, the narrator is drawn in the comic version as a carbon copy of . . . Gaiman himself¹⁸. This shows in the narrator's facial traits, but also in his overall figure, his haircut and his customary black outfit. This will be obvious¹⁹ to anyone who is

familiar with Gaiman's work; his omnipresence in the new media of the twenty-first century (Sommers ix), and particularly in the social media²⁰, makes it almost impossible for his readers not to be familiar with his physical appearance. And if, by any chance, the reader did not recognize Gaiman in the traits of the narrator, the co-text of the comic will make sure that the reference does not go unnoticed.

The association between author and narrator²¹ in "Feeders and Eaters" is unambiguously announced in the paratext of the short story, and more specifically in its introduction. Gaiman openly reveals that his inspiration for the story came directly from a nightmare²² he had in his twenties, in which he was one of the protagonists. The co-text of the comic version²³, for its part, truly brings this association to its high point. After being initially published as a one-shot comic in the magazine *Revolver Horror Special* (Fleetway, 1990, art by Mark Buckingham), "Feeders and Eaters" was reissued as a one-shot again in *Asylum #2* (1993), then in *The Best Of Asylum Vol.1* (1994). It was eventually collected in *Feeders and Eaters and Other Stories*, and distributed in the Humble Bundle²⁴ dedicated to Gaiman in 2015, which was made available again for Gaiman's contemporary audience. The co-text of "Feeders and Eaters" in this collection is far from insignificant. *Feeders and Eaters and Other Stories* compiles "Feeders and Eaters" with three other one-shots, all of them illustrated by Mark Buckingham and characterized by a strong metafictional nature. The two-page comic "True Things" (2008), written by Gaiman, develops some sort of metaphorical fantasy about his real-life close friend, the writer Alan Moore. The one-page "An Image to Maintain" (1993) consists of twelve very similar panels portraying Buckingham on the phone with Gaiman and blackmailing him into giving him some new material to work on²⁵. The aesthetic work on a single image in this comic echoes the pop-art quality of the last one-shot of the collection, which represents Gaiman's face in a very Andy Warhol style. Whereas the central portrait of Gaiman looks remarkably faithful, the framing pictures are more stylized and reproduce the figure of the narrator in "Feeders and Eaters". The collection thus ends on a representation of Gaiman that enjoins the reader, if it was not already done, to unequivocally associate the figure of the author with the narrator when going back to the initial story.

While remarkably playful, such a persistent association of narrator and author in the short story's context and co-texts also brings the metafictional dimension of "Feeders and Eaters" to its zenith. If Gaiman and the narrator are meant to be amalgamated, and if the narrator is suggested to be potentially immortal, then, by transitivity, it is the question of the author's immortality and his oeuvre that is indirectly addressed in the story. Once these questions have been raised by the multiple contexts of the short story, it becomes hardly possible to go back to the text without remaining aware of them²⁶. As a result, while the more explicit metafictional references in "Feeders and Eaters" celebrates fiction and stories, the metafictional quality induced by the multiple contexts of the story, and more specifically by the lively relationship between author, narrator and the metaphor of the mouth, eventually culminates in an extensive celebration of the *immortality* of fiction and stories.

Conclusion

As a recurrent issue in Gaiman's work, metafiction tends to appear in a remarkable multiplicity of forms and in a large number of his stories. What "Troll Bridge" and "Feeders and Eaters" share in this regard is a very subtle dynamic that allows these metafictional issues to be laid bare and dissected through a metaphor of the devouring mouth; and both stories, through this metaphor, put into perspective a human desire for endlessness to ultimately shift the focus to the everlasting quality of stories and storytelling. In both cases, however, considering the short story as a single isolated object proves to be counterproductive, particularly given the contemporary literary context²⁷, marked by disseminative and transmedia strategies, in which Gaiman takes part. By contrast, when the multiple contexts of these two short stories, such as their paratexts, their counterparts in other media and their co-texts, are taken into account, their metafictional potential seems to reach its zenith. This precise dialectic of sacralisation and desacralisation of immortality and its resulting celebration of stories when illuminated by the context seems to be a persisting motif in Gaiman's short stories. For example, a very similar analysis to the analysis above of "Troll Bridge" and "Feeders and Eaters" could also apply in the case of the short story "Snow, Glass, Apples" (*Smoke and Mirrors*), in which Snow White's vampirism leads to a desacralisation of human immortality, while the metafictional aspect of the text (notably via the narrator's comments) culminates when the reader takes the metatext into account.

In both "Troll Bridge" and "Feeders and Eaters", what is striking is that taking the context of the short stories into account results in the possibility of rocketing from a metafictional comment on the singular (the authenticity or the repetition of a particular story) to a metafictional comment on the general, or on the conceptual (the immortality of stories as discarnate objects, of storytelling as a necessary act). While the question of metafictional strategies per se might seem quite well-worn, or even a bit clichéd nowadays, transferring the sacred to "more abstract notions such as imagination and storytelling" (Licari-Guillaume 12) is actually highly instrumental for Gaiman in building a larger comment on the importance of stories in our day-to-day life, on the way they influence the relationships that we shape and reshape throughout our lives, and on the legacy that we intend to leave as human beings after we die. Such questions are at the core of Gaiman's fiction, but also non-fiction, as hinted at by his repeated focus on the importance of literacy and libraries²⁸ in his essays. Metafictional strategies in Gaiman's work can thus be understood as some sort of a weaponisation of stories in order to make larger cultural points (Eveleth & Wigard 15), which he reinforces via the multiple contexts that he surrounds these stories with. As for human immortality, maybe in this particular case it can be something more than a punishment or a sort of purgatory: as Gaiman said in a speech on Douglas Adams, "our stories care for us, they make us human, and if they live forever the people who created them, who retell them, who pass them along, are living too. And that's immortality".

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Notes

¹ The traditional tale "Three Billy Goats Gruff" ("De tre bukkene Bruse" in Norwegian) involves three goats who have no grass left to eat. They decide to leave, and come across a bridge under which lives a troll who eats anyone who tries to cross. The first and second goats manage to trick the troll into letting them pass by convincing him that he had better wait for the next goat, who will be fatter. When the third goat comes across, he is big enough to challenge the troll and defeat him – the three goats then reach a beautiful meadow and live happily ever after.

² Such a predisposition is chillingly announced in her plea to Eddie after he kills the cat: "Who's going to feed me now?" (274).

³ In *American Gods*, the main character has an ability to make himself unobtrusive, and is named Shadow; in *Neverwhere*, the door to otherness is incarnated in a character named Door. The seven Endless, in the

Sandman, are directly named after their function (Dream, Death, Desire, Despair, Destruction, Destiny, Delight/Delirium).

⁴ When Effie Corvier, who is so weak that she is confined to her bed, tells Eddie "I'm not ill (...). I'm hungry. That's all" (270), she already suggests that her physical state closely depends, not on health or age, but on her access to flesh to consume.

⁵ When taking into account the meaningfulness of Miss Corvier's surname, it is not that surprising that two characters who share such similar forenames as Eddie and Effie will show other common traits. Thus, Effie's immortality might easily be considered as symbolically announcing the immortality, though unconventional in its nature, of Eddie.

⁶ The description of Eddie's eaten hand is quite shocking: "most of the flesh had been picked from the bones, chewed like chicken wings, leaving only dried morsels of meat, scraps and crumbs, and little else. He only had three fingers left, and most of a thumb. I suppose the other finger-bones must have just fallen right off, with no skin or flesh to hold them on." (275).

⁷ When Eddie gets up and leaves the café, the narrator mentions that he is surprised to see that he is still a tall man, since "he'd collapsed in on himself in so many other ways" (275). There is a considerable contrast between the physical shape of Eddie ten years before, and the image he projects now : he was "big, strong, not very bright, and terribly, terribly good-looking. But that was ten years ago. The man sitting at the Formica table wasn't good-looking. His eyes were dull, and rimmed with red, and they stared down at the table-top, without hope. His skin was grey. He was too thin, obscenely thin. I could see his scalp through his filthy hair" (267).

⁸ The comic *The Facts in the Case of the Departure of Miss Finch* (Gaiman, Zulli, Klein) is very similar to "Feeders and eaters" in the sense that it involves a narrator directly addressing the reader and insisting on the exactitude of the story he is recounting. In this story, furthermore, the narrator openly mentions that he is working as a writer.

⁹ Maybe one of the most striking occurrences of such a blurring of boundaries is the one found in Gaiman's *A Black and White World*, a Batman comic illustrated by Simon Bisley and lettered by John Costanza. In these eight black and white pages, Batman and the Joker are talking together in a waiting room and commenting on the scenario of the story they have to enact later that day in the studio, playing their own role for a comic. They are actors. Not only does the metafictional of this work completely dominate its scenario, but the distance that it creates from the same scenario gives the impression that the story is a form of reality talking straight to the reader.

¹⁰ "I won't tell you which city. (...) I prowled the streets around the station until I found an all-night café. (...) You know the kind of place ; you've been there : café's name on a Pepsi sign above a dirty plate-glass window, dried egg residue between the tines of all their forks" (265).

¹¹ Most of Gaiman's texts of non-fiction deploy narrative strategies that make them very similar to his works of fiction. This is reinforced by the marketing strategies that he applies: in 2016, he published for the first time a collection of non-fiction (essays, introductions, articles, interviews, etc.), and managed its advertising as if it were one of his books of fiction (tour, signing sessions, teasers).

¹² The dissemination (or remediation) of a story in different media is a recurrent technique in Gaiman's work. For instance, as noted by Perino (47), *Neverwhere* began as a BBC miniseries (1996) accompanied by an authorized novelisation and comic adaptation (2005). *Stardust* began as a novel with illustrations (1997), was reprinted as a novel (1998), and was later made into a major motion picture (2007).

¹³ The collection *Fragile Things* (2006) is the second of the three major collections of short stories published by Gaiman, along with *Smoke and Mirrors* (1998) and *Trigger Warning* (2015). It won the Locus Award for Best Collection in 2007.

¹⁴ Immortality is actually even more explicitly linked to the idea of consumption in the comics than in the short story, since the old woman openly associates flesh consumption and regeneration in her discourse (something that is not as explicitly disclosed in the short story): "I need my meat. I need the life" (9).

¹⁵ This begs the question, of course, of whose mouth is represented on the cover of the comics.

¹⁶ Once aware of these cannibalistic tones, going back to the short story and especially to the description of the narrator makes previously insignificant elements appear in a different light. A notion of danger

seems to repeatedly emerge, especially in a story that is so very short, where each comment seems carefully selected: "It was late one night, and I was cold, in a city where I had no right to be. Not at that time of night, anyway (265); "Eddie's table was by the window, where anyone could see you walking past. Not somewhere I'd sit by choice, not if it was up to me" (267); "I didn't care. I had enough problems of my own" (267). Even the unusual dietary habit of the narrator seems more conspicuous with this reading key: "I still like my liver rare, and sometimes (...) I'll cut a thin slice of raw liver before I season it, and I'll eat it, relishing the texture and the naked, iron taste" (271).

¹⁷ This anonymisation is fully assumed in the short story, where the narrator has no name, is never described in terms of physical appearance, and never mentions his occupation. Quite early in the story, Eddie hails the narrator. The discussion, which is at first recounted in direct speech, is then abruptly turned to reported speech when it would have meant mentioning the narrator's name to the reader: "It was a man's voice. 'You,' the voice said, and I knew he was talking to me, not to the room. 'I know you. Come here. Sit over here.' (...) Then he said my name, and I turned and looked at him" (266). While this structure is similar in the comic version, the reader has the graphic representation of the narrator at his or her disposal to establish his identity.

¹⁸ Such an author/narrator conflation is not unusual in Gaiman's work, as underlined by Camus (397) : "En somme, une partie de la rhétorique de certains métatextes semble consister à faire déborder les termes mythiques et fantastiques de la métafiction gaimanienne hors des limites du texte de fiction, et à incorporer la figure publique de l'auteur dans le 'mythe du Conteur', comme si Gaiman était un de ses propres personnages".

¹⁹ On descriptive and catalogue websites such as www.comics.org, Gaiman is even straightforwardly indicated for this short story as one of the characters.

²⁰ Gaiman is particularly active on Facebook, Twitter, and on his web page and blog, where he constantly posts information relative not only to his work but also to his private life. His image was further popularized by his apparition in an episode of the TV series *The Simpsons*.

²¹ This association between author and narrator, however, entirely disappears in yet another adaptation of the story for a TV mini-series, *Neil Gaiman's Likely Stories*, in which "Feeders and Eaters" is the second out of four episodes. In this version, the narrator is replaced with a pregnant waitress called Joyce. In the following episode, however, the main protagonist is no less than a writer by trade...

²² "This story was a nightmare I had in my twenties. I love dreams. I know enough about them to know that dream logic is not story logic, and that you can rarely bring a dream back as a tale: it will have transformed from gold into leaves, from silk to cobwebs, on waking. Still, there are things you can bring back with you from dreams: atmosphere, moments, people, a theme. This is the only time I can remember bringing back a whole story, though" (*Fragile Things* 18).

²³ Yet another comic adaptation of "Feeders and Eaters" is soon to be released (Dark Horse Editions, 2018), in the context of a collection illustrated by Buckingham and comprising the four short stories adapted as a TV mini-series under the title *Neil Gaiman's Likely Stories* (2016). It will be interesting to see if "Feeders and Eaters" is re-illustrated for the occasion, and, if so, to see if the merging of author and narrator is maintained.

²⁴ A "Humble Bundle" temporarily available on the Humble Bundle distribution platform (www.humblebundle.com) is a collection of various works of art, games, books or other digital content revolving around a specific theme or artist. The mission of the platform is to support charity ("Humble") while providing interesting content to customers at great prices ("Bundle"). The Gaiman Humble Bundle, made available in 2015, featured "books published early in his career, never collected works from anthologies, barely published books with small print runs, or pieces that were never published at all. This includes short stories, essays, comics, music biography, poems, teleplays, prose fiction and even lyrics and speeches" (Burton np).

²⁵ In this comic, the title "An Image to Maintain" is a pun referring at the same time to Gaiman's obligation to give in to Buckingham's blackmail in order to avoid humiliation ("Remember the evening party? You... disco dancing! Well, I got it all on video..."), and to the aesthetics of the page, which maintains almost the same image in all its panels.

²⁶ The fact that the different adaptations of "Feeders and Eaters" lead to very different interpretations in terms of what is truly at stake in the text begs the interesting question whether these transpositions between different media are fundamentally more of a case of crossmediality, intermediality or transmediality. It seems, at any rate, that the multiple contexts and co-texts of the adaptations ultimately have a role to play in the delimitation of such categories.

²⁷ According to Camus, it is precisely this literary context and Gaiman's posture that leads to the proliferation of meaning in his oeuvre: "Gaiman entre dans la catégorie des 'auteurs-célébrités' qui développent d'abondantes stratégies de communication autour de leurs œuvres, [ce qui peut], parfois, enrichir la communication textuelle de strates de signification supplémentaires, de résonances entre l'extérieur et l'intérieur du texte" (396).

²⁸ Gaiman's non-fiction (essays, interviews, talks) frequently addresses the importance of books, stories and literature, notably for children. See, for instance, his essay "Why our future depends on libraries, reading and daydreaming: the Reading Agency Lecture" (2013) in *The View from the Cheap Seats: Selected Nonfiction* (2016).