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# Deconstructing the Hero

—IAIN THOMSON

Obviously, if you're going to be doing something new, then to a degree you're destroying—[Laughs]—whatever preceded it.

—ALAN MOORE (Kavanagh, 2000)

But by my love and hope I beseech you: Do not throw away the hero in your soul! Hold holy your highest hope!

—FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE (tr. by Kaufmann, 156)

Our identities as individuals and as groups are shaped, in ways both subtle and profound, by our heroes. If our enemies (and the other “villains” in our psychic narratives) help give us a sense of who we are *not*, of what we stand *against*, then, conversely, our heroes help tell us who we *are*, what we stand *for*.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, as Heidegger recognized, the heroes we choose focus our common sense of what is most important in life, shaping our feel for which battles we should fight as well as how we should go about fighting them. Thus those who chose Martin Luther King Jr. as their hero, for example, pursued very different goals, and pursued them in a very different manner, than those who heroized Adolph Hitler.<sup>2</sup> Despite the obvious differences, however, in both cases the chosen hero functioned like a mirror, reflecting back to the group an idealized image of itself, an ideal concentrated and so given an almost *superhuman* form. What happens, then, when we *shatter* these mirrors? What does it mean when we seek not just to destroy our heroes—to

gleefully expose their feet of clay, their human, all-too-human failings—but to *deconstruct* the very idea of the hero?<sup>3</sup> Does this deconstruction of the hero argue for—or against—the historical dispensability of the hero? Why do Enlightenment thinkers, existentialists, and postmodernists give such different answers to this question? What is at stake in their disagreement?

In pursuit of these questions, we will follow a perhaps surprising itinerary, one which leads back to the masterworks of the great existentialists by way of a postmodern comic book.<sup>4</sup> Written by Alan Moore and illustrated by Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen* is best known as the comic book with which comic books “grew up.”<sup>5</sup> *Watchmen* helped accomplish this coming of age, not—as in the romantic *Bildungsroman* tradition which stretches back to *Beowulf* and Homer’s *Odyssey*—by celebrating the *development* of its heroes, but rather by developing its heroes precisely in order to *deconstruct* the very idea of the hero, overloading and thereby shattering this idealized reflection of humanity and so encouraging us to reflect upon its significance from the many different angles of the shards left lying on the ground.

## I. SHATTERING: FRAGMENT OF A *BILDUNGSROMAN*

With *Watchmen*, comic books came of age, and, in a sense (a coincidence which is not merely coincidental), we grew up together. During 1986–87, while *Watchmen* was being published, I was an 18 year-old freshman at UC Berkeley, living in overcrowded dorms and working part-time at the Best of Two Worlds, a once great but now defunct comic book store on Telegraph Avenue, right around the corner from the legendary “People’s Park”. Although I tried to play it cool, this was a dream job for me, as some of my most memorable childhood pilgrimages had been to this very store. To get there, my younger brother and I had to convince one of our parents to drive us (sometimes with a lucky friend or two) from Davis (ninety long minutes away) to Berkeley, where, after being dropped off (always for too brief a time), we hurried past pan-handlers, drug-pushers, mentally-ill homeless (quite obviously off their medications), street artisans and performers, plus a wide assortment of colorful locals (I later learned some of their names—the

Bubble Lady, Polka-Dot Man, Hate-Man—they sounded like tragically fallen heroes and were embraced by the counter-cultural Berkeley community as anti-heroes), all of whom seemed completely unlike anyone we had ever seen before. As a result, the Best of Two Worlds felt like it was located in the eye of a slightly threatening and deeply intriguing storm called “Berkeley.”<sup>6</sup>

The owner of the Best of Two Worlds—despite being, as comic collectors might say, “a few issues short of a complete run”—knew exactly what he was doing when he hired me; like most of the core staff I took much of my salary in comics, which meant (because of the difference between wholesale prices and employee discounts) that we were actually paid very little, and the store benefited from the combined expertise of a group of hardcore comic book fans. Growing up, I was the kid that the owners of the local comic book shop called when they were unable to answer some customer’s question; now I was surrounded by comic experts who knew at least as much as I did. (It was here that I first found that concentration of intellectual talent I had expected from UC Berkeley itself, but did not encounter there until I started taking advanced political theory and philosophy courses.) We employees each had our areas of particular expertise; as befitted a small-town boy, mine was superhero comics. One of the older employees—a diffident artist who exuded that air of bitter superiority any fan of *The Simpsons* would recognize from Matt Groening’s grotesque but knowing caricature (“Worst. Episode. Ever.”)—took a perverse pleasure in turning me on to *Watchmen*, which was then coming out each month.

To begin to imagine the impact of *Watchmen* on die-hard superhero comics fans like me, visualize a train-wreck taking place in twelve monthly installments. I may not then have recognized *Watchmen* as a deconstruction of the hero, but certainly I realized (with that combination of horror and fascination known to rubberneckers everywhere) that here my precious heroes were being *shattered* before my very eyes, taken apart from the inside-out, in the pages of the medium that had always loved and cared for them, and in a style that demonstrated an obvious mastery of this medium that it now set out to implode. As I sift once again through the rubble, it is, moreover, clear to me—for to reread *Watchmen* is to be stunned once again by the brutal clarity of this masterful deconstruction of the hero—that Moore and Gibbons knew exactly what they were doing.

## II. REREADING, RETROACTIVE DEFAMILIARIZATION, AND THE UNCANNY

Perhaps the first thing one realizes upon rereading *Watchmen* is that it *requires* rereading. *Watchmen* was written to be reread; indeed, it can only be read by being reread.<sup>7</sup> That may sound paradoxical, but upon rereading *Watchmen* it becomes painfully obvious that the meanings of almost every word, image, panel, and page are multiple—*obviously* multiple.<sup>8</sup> In *Watchmen*, the meanings are primarily multiplied by the fact—and this is painfully obvious when one finishes the series and then rereads it—that, from the first panel (a blood-stained smiley-face, looking like a clock counting-down to midnight, floating in a gutter of blood), the parts all fit into a whole one grasps only in the end (although in retrospect the hints are everywhere).<sup>9</sup> Because that end is so unsuspected and surprising (I will spoil it in the next section), the parts are given a new and different meaning by their place in it. This new meaning, moreover, immediately strikes home as the true meaning of the work, thereby subverting and displacing the first reading.

Rereading *Watchmen*, we thus undergo the same kind of *retroactive defamiliarization* we experience when, rereading Aeschylus’s *Oresteia*, we blushing realize that on our first reading we had been taken in, along with King Agamemnon himself, by the beautiful duplicity of Queen Clytemnestra’s early speeches, for now we recognize that her artful words, seductive on a first reading, drip with venom on a second. Or, to use a more recent example, we experience the same kind of retroactive defamiliarization when, viewing M. Night Shyamalan’s *The Sixth Sense*, we share the protagonist’s stunning realization that he himself is a ghost, a realization which displaces and reorients our entire sense of the film. (Of course, one does not need actually to re-view *The Sixth Sense*—to view it twice—since Shyamalan, apparently not trusting his audience, embeds a reviewing within it, in the form of a series of flashbacks. Thanks to this rather heavy-handed move—which, to be fair, only Aeschylus never condescends to make—to view *The Sixth Sense* is already to re-view it.) In Moore’s *Watchmen*, Aeschylus’s *Oresteia*, and Shyamalan’s *The Sixth Sense*, rereading effects this retroactive defamiliarization by undermining and displacing the familiar sense that emerged from and guided the first “reading,” changing our minds about

what we thought we understood by leading us to recognize that in fact we had not understood what we thought we understood.

With such retroactive defamiliarization, we experience what Heidegger called the “uncanny” (*unheimlich*, literally, “unhomelike”). Although this is often overlooked, we can only experience this uncanniness (this *Unheimlichkeit* or sense of “not-being-at-home”) somewhere that we have first been at home. One’s *first* reading of a new text, like one’s first visit to a new city or one’s first date with a new person, might be strange, different, disorienting, even anxiety-provoking, but it cannot be *uncanny*. The uncanny emerges only with “rereading,” when what seemed familiar suddenly becomes strange—and *estranging*; it is as if we are gripped by that upon which we have lost our grip. (Here I am using “rereading” in the broad Derridean sense, which applies to the lives we lead as well as the texts we more literally “read,” since, as Derrida provocatively put it, “there is nothing but text.”) When rereading uncanny works, we find ourselves no longer at home in our first reading; we realize that the first reading was not a “reading” properly so-called, since (we now realize) we had not yet understood the text on that first reading, although we assumed, of course, that we did understand it, and so we learn (or at least are encouraged to learn) to become more reflective about the course that we have been following with unreflective self-assurance. Shattering this self-assurance—with the realization that we were ignorant of our own ignorance—has been, since Socrates at least, one of the first pedagogical steps (and stumbling blocks) of the philosophical education.<sup>10</sup>

Uncanny works, moreover, in that they must be reread in order to be *read*, teach us something fundamental about reading itself, namely, that at least some of the great works survive and perpetuate themselves not by statically maintaining eternal truths, or even simply by offering successive generations the same experience again and again, but rather by being deep enough—that is, resonant enough, *meaningful* enough—to continue to generate new readings, even those revolutionary rereadings which radically reorient our original sense of the work. It was by helping to effect just such a revolutionary reorientation of the entire genre of superhero comic books that *Watchmen* established itself as a great work, a work of postmodern deconstruction. This means that *Watchmen* is not only a work of rereading, a work that we have to reread simply in order to read, but that *Watchmen* itself has to be understood as a rereading of the history of comic books.

*Watchmen* gives us a revisionary history that asks (as one astute observer put it), “What would have happened to us if costumed heroes had appeared in reality around the same time they appeared in the American pop consciousness?”<sup>11</sup>

### III. DECONSTRUCTION, THE UNHAPPY REALIZATION OF FANTASY, AND NIHILISM

The animating idea in the background of *Watchmen* is as simple as it is compelling: What if superheroes were real? What would it *really* be like if comic book heroes walked among us? By taking this question with deadly seriousness, *Watchmen* shows that previous comics in fact failed to do so. Yes, Peter Parker had his share of personal problems, but he (let alone his impact on his world) only seems real until one reads *Watchmen*. If, moreover, the *Spider-Man* movie did a surprisingly good job of seeming real (and so helping to suspend the disbelief of its audience), this was thanks not only to the inspired casting of the main character (Tobey Maguire had already established a Peter Parker—like screen persona in *The Ice Storm* and *Wonder Boys*), it was also because the movie seems to have been influenced by a recent re-telling of *Spider-Man* which is itself part of a series of deliberately *realist* reprisals (namely, Marvel’s “Ultimate” versions of its most famous comics), a series inspired in large part by the dark realism of *Watchmen*. (Thus, however ungenerous the sentiment, Moore is not entirely wrong when he denigrates such work as *Watchmen*’s “deformed bastard grandchildren.”)<sup>12</sup>

In effect, *Watchmen* makes the case that if our superhero fantasies were realized, our world would be radically altered, and not for the better. In this way it asks us, “Which world would you rather live in?”<sup>13</sup> In the alternative reality which forms the backdrop for *Watchmen*, America won the Vietnam war (with the help of the earth’s only super-powered hero, “Dr. Manhattan”); Nixon was never impeached, since an especially right-wing hero (“The Comedian”) killed Woodward and Bernstein; there are no longer any superhero comics (apparently no one wants to read about them in a world with actual superheroes; in fact, many ordinary people hate these heroes, who they perceive, correctly in most cases, as right-wing pawns of a repressive government); instead, very dark Pirate comics now dominate the market

(in this reality, unlike our own, no censoring “comics code” was ever imposed because the government protected the genre which had spawned the heroes upon whom it became politically dependent); the cold war is being won by America, thanks to our super-powered being (Dr. Manhattan); unfortunately, this American “superman” (or “God”) has Russia terrified about its chances of survival, so when Dr. Manhattan decides to leave the earth (humanity having become no more interesting to this him than ants are to us), an atomic world war (and planet-destroying nuclear holocaust) seems imminent.<sup>14</sup> It is a bleak vision, to be sure, but one made entirely compelling by the unprecedented wealth of background detail Moore and Gibbons deftly weave into the story.

Moore did not need Jean Baudrillard (perhaps the greatest of the post-modern philosophers) to tell him that “the idea is destroyed by its own realization,” that the “extreme” development of an idea (which takes that idea beyond its own limits, end, or terminus, into “a state of ex-termination”) can thereby destroy it—as, for example, sex is destroyed by “porn,” which is “more sexual than sex”; the body by “obesity,” which is “fatter than fat”; violence by “terror,” which is “more violent than violence”; information by “simulation,” which is “truer than true”; time by “instantaneity,” which is “more present than the present,” and as, in *Watchmen*, the hero is destroyed by the superhero, who is more heroic than any hero, but whose extreme “heroics” are no longer recognizable as *heroics*.<sup>15</sup> Moore seems instinctively to know (or else he has, like *Watchmen*’s Ozymandias, studied “a hundred different philosophies”) that one of the most powerful deconstructive strategies involves provisionally accepting an idea, thesis, position, or worldview, then working from inside it to extend it beyond its limits until it is eventually made to collapse under its own weight, like a plant forced to bear fruit too heavy for its own branches.<sup>16</sup> I would call this strategy *hypertrophic deconstruction* (after Nietzsche, who recognized that “a hypertrophic virtue . . . may bring about the decay of a people as much as a hypertrophic vice.” [Preuss 8]). *Watchmen* deconstructs the hero by developing its heroes—extending traditional hero fantasies beyond their limits—to the point where the reader comes to understand that these fantasies, realized, become nightmares.

*Watchmen* begins, tellingly, with the hero “Rorschach,” a hypertrophic development of the Batman archetype. Batman himself, of course, was

already a later version of *The Shadow*, a character drawn from the notoriously gritty, “detective” genre of pulp fiction.<sup>17</sup> With Rorschach, however, Moore gives us such an extreme version of the archetypal “hard-nosed detective” character that not only Bogart but the entire *film noir* genre (even such John Woo films as *The Killer*) look squeaky clean by comparison. *Watchmen*’s intentionally shocking first words establish this dark and violent mood: “Rorschach’s Journal. October 12th, 1985: Dog Carcass in alley this morning, tire tread on burst stomach. This city is afraid of me. I have seen its true face.”<sup>18</sup> As this notion of “seeing” the “true face” already hints, Rorschach takes his name (and his mask, which he views as his own true “face”) from the famous “ink-blot test” in which a psychiatrist asks an analysand to interpret an image that has no meaning of its own, in order to gain access to the analysand’s unconscious as it is revealed in the meanings the analysand *projects* onto the image (*Watchmen* V. 18 .vi–vii). By opening (and “closing”) the comic with Rorschach, Moore implies that comic book heroes are projections of the fantasies of their readers—as well as their authors.<sup>19</sup> *Watchmen*’s development of Rorschach as a character makes clear Moore’s contention that these wishful superheroic fantasies of power stem not just from a deep fear that we are powerless to live up to our own ideals, but also from an even deeper fear that these ideals themselves are mere *projections* with which we cover over and so conceal from ourselves “the real horror” that “in the end” reality “is simply an empty meaningless blackness.”<sup>20</sup> Thus we learn, for example, that Rorschach was driven to become a “masked hero” by the neglect, abuse, and abandonment he suffered as a foster child, that his right-wing ideology is itself a construction with which he tries in vain to please a father he never knew, and that the real evil he encountered soon after putting on his mask led him to reject his humanity for his mask and so become empty, a blank onto which others would project their own fears—becoming, in philosophical terms, a *nihilist*. (As Rorschach puts it, “Existence is random, [it] has no pattern save what we imagine after staring at it for too long. No meaning save what we choose to impose”). Although Moore presents us here with one of *Watchmen*’s brilliantly twisted versions of the “secret origins” device common to all super-hero comics, Rorschach’s *nihilism*—his defining conviction that reality is ultimately meaningless—cannot simply be dismissed as a symptom of the personal psychological traumas that led him to become a “hero.”

Instead, Moore presents nihilism as a psychological state shared by almost all the heroes in *Watchmen*. Initially, Moore suggests that, given the black-and-white, all-or-nothing mentality of the kind of person who would become a hero (a person who wants to believe in “absolute values” but encounters only “darkness and ambiguity”), nihilism is a natural fall-back position.<sup>21</sup> It is as if, rebounding from an inevitable collision with moral ambiguity, such a hero precipitously concludes that, since our values are not absolute, they must be relative—their absolutism having led them falsely to assume these alternatives to be exhaustive. Later, however, Moore deepens this explanation by suggesting that such nihilism is the natural complement of a thoroughly scientific worldview. As I mentioned earlier, “Dr. Manhattan” is *Watchmen*’s only truly super-powered being; he is a hero of the “Superman” archetype, but his seemingly omnipotent power over matter comes from his own advanced scientific understanding of—and consequent control over—the physical world. In Dr. Manhattan, Moore embodies our near-deification of science—and its dangers. Thus *Watchmen* tells us not only that Dr. Manhattan “symbolized mankind’s problems,” but that his name was itself chosen for its “ominous associations,” namely, the government-controlled scientific project that produced the first atom bomb, and so, more broadly, science’s god-like power to control nature and its perilous consequences (*Watchmen* XI. 22.ii and IV. 12.viii). *Watchmen* thus says that: “We are all of us living in the shadow of Dr. Manhattan”; this “shadow” is the dark side of science—the nihilism of a thoroughly objectified and thereby disenchanting world, a world science takes to be intrinsically value-free, and so ultimately meaningless (a meaninglessness which nuclear annihilation threatens to realize).<sup>22</sup> Hence, when told about the murder of another hero, Dr. Manhattan’s revealing reply is: “A live body and a dead body contain the same number of particles. Structurally, there is no discernible difference. Life and death are unquantifiable abstracts. Why should I be concerned?”<sup>23</sup>

In the end, *Watchmen* not only deconstructs the motivations of its individual heroes (who become heroes to please their mothers, because of traumatic childhoods, repressed homoerotic urges, naively absolutist worldviews, fetishes for costumes, equipment, night-patrols, and so on). By presenting nihilism as the simple, unvarnished truth about life in a godless universe, Moore seeks to deconstruct the would-be hero’s ultimate motivation, namely, to provide a secular salvation and so attain a mortal immortality.<sup>24</sup> If there

is no God, who will save us? This is the basic question to which *Watchmen*’s heroes seek to respond. (Thus the old hero implores the young, would-be heroes who had briefly gathered before him, even as they walk away: “Somebody has to do it, don’t you see. Somebody has to save the world.” *Watchmen* II. 11.vii.) The hero rises above normal human beings by *saving* them, and, through this secular salvation, he or she lives on in their memory. Ozymandias, the hero who most lucidly realizes all this, unapologetically seeks to put himself in the place previously thought to be occupied by God (*Watchmen* II.9.ii–iii; XII.27.ii.). His ability to shoulder this superhuman responsibility—by choosing to sacrifice millions of innocent lives in a bid to save the world from nuclear annihilation—not only makes him a hero with which most of us cannot identify, it also puts him above, and so alienates him from, humanity in general.<sup>25</sup>

Although *Watchmen*’s heroes all subscribe to the nihilistic belief that reality is ultimately meaningless, they are *heroes* precisely in so far as they embrace this nihilism and nevertheless seek a path leading beyond it.<sup>26</sup> By suggesting that all such paths may be either hopeless or horrific, and that the heroes’ motives for seeking them are either dangerous or else unworthy of our admiration, *Watchmen* develops its heroes precisely in order to ask us if we would not in fact be better off without heroes. In order to suggest a response, I will now examine the perhaps surprising conceptual roots of *Watchmen*’s postmodern cynicism in the Enlightenment, then show that the existentialists too deconstructed the hero, but that their deconstructions suggest very different conclusions.

#### IV. FRAMING THE FRAME: SHOULD HISTORY DISPENSE WITH THE HERO?<sup>27</sup>

Does the apparent paucity of real heroes in our culture suggest that we are living in a post-heroic age? If not, *should* we seek to dispense with heroes? Isaiah Berlin famously maintains that Romanticism’s tendency toward hero-worship helped spark the flames of fascism, and so he suggests that, after the terrible conflagration of the Holocaust, for one human being to heroize another is a dangerously childish refusal of “Enlightenment,” and thus an historically retrogressive resistance to what was for Kant the “essential destiny”

of “human nature”: We human beings must grow up, emerge from our “self-imposed immaturity,” and have the “courage” to think for ourselves.<sup>28</sup> Have we indeed reached the point in history when, in pursuit of autonomy, we need to put away such childish things—as heroes? Or is the intense cynicism of the times perhaps merely a burnt shell that hides (and thereby also shelters and protects) an inextinguishable human need for something better: Hope, ideals, a future worth pursuing, and heroes to lead us there? If one takes the history of the West and subtracts all the stories of its heroes, what remains? Can there even be a *meaningful* history—a history worth living—without heroes?

These are fateful questions, for history concerns the future at least as much as the past. We “exist” (from the Latin, *ek-sistere*, to “stand out”) historically. As Heidegger saw, we enact the life-projects which render us intelligible—to ourselves and to others—only by projecting the past into the future and so constituting the present. History is a congealing of this basic temporality; it is time made thick. Indeed, without the historical dimension of intelligibility, our existence would be desiccated, massively impoverished; the temporal frame through which we live would be too transient to sustain the thick worlds of meaning that make us who we are. We cannot meaningfully be without history; so, can history be meaningful without its hero stories? If the West began to confront such fateful questions as the last millennium drew to a close, this was due not only to the eschatological despair that drives millennialism and thereby betrays our (more or less conscious) belief that *history is over*, a thanatological belief which has been haunting the cultural unconscious of the West for almost two thousand years but which, as our technology becomes ever more destructive, is in increasing danger of being self-fulfilling.<sup>29</sup> This fateful questioning of the hero emerges even more directly in those philosophical counter-movements to millennial despair (post-modernism, post-colonialism, post-imperialism, and the like) which seek to get us beyond our destructive desire to get beyond (our limits, borders, finitude, and so on).

In *Watchmen*, a text now widely regarded as a major work of postmodern literature, the imminence of just such a self-fulfilling apocalypse is one of the major points of departure for the plot. Recall that *Watchmen*’s signature image (which appears on *Watchmen*’s first cover as well as its first and last panels) depicts a blood-stained happy-face, the blood transforming the

smiley into a millennium-clock twelve minutes (that is, twelve issues) away from midnight (*Watchmen* I.1.i and XII.32.vii). Ozymandias—the heroic “world’s smartest man” who uses his intelligence to avert nuclear holocaust in the shocking culmination of the story—tells an interviewer earlier: “I believe there are some people who really do want, if only subconsciously [*sic*], an end to the world. . . . I see the twentieth century as a race between enlightenment and extinction.”<sup>30</sup> If Ozymandias sounds like Isaiah Berlin here, however, we need to recall that Ozymandias intentionally kills millions of innocent people—“half of New York”—in his successful bid to convince cold-warring nations on the brink of a nuclear war that they are being attacked by an alien species and so must put aside their differences and band together in order to survive.<sup>31</sup> This is no mere triumph of consequentialist reasoning over the deontological ethics of the Enlightenment. Read carefully (which, I have argued, is the only way it can be *read*), *Watchmen* clearly calls Ozymandias’s “less obvious heroism” into question along with the more traditional “schoolboy heroics” of the other heroes, who proved incapable of resolving a world crisis of such magnitude.<sup>32</sup> Thus, in all the ways we have seen (and more), *Watchmen*’s deconstruction of the hero suggests that perhaps the time for heroes has passed, and this, as we will see next, distinguishes this postmodern work from those deconstructions of the hero contained in the existentialist movement that preceded postmodernism.<sup>33</sup>

## V. EXISTENTIAL DECONSTRUCTIONS OF THE HERO

Existentialism, that philosophical tradition previously best known for radical questioning (the tradition which, with Heidegger, gave us the very concept of *deconstruction*), questioned, but did not overturn, the great importance Western history has *always* accorded to the hero. (“Always,” here that means—since we are talking about Western history—beginning with our own beginning: Our founding myths are hero stories all.) Indeed, of the three greatest existential philosophers, Nietzsche and Heidegger both found it easier to give up their own devout Christianity than to stop believing in heroes.<sup>34</sup> The third, Kierkegaard, transformed Christian faith into an

heroic act, heroizing faith in provocatively contemporary terms: Kierkegaard's "knight of faith" is essentially a secret identity, an identity "the public" can never see. Wrapping this existential riddle inside the enigma of his own authorship, Kierkegaard permitted himself to describe his hero (which is also an obvious attempt at self-heroization) only while masking his own authorial identity with various pseudonyms.<sup>35</sup> This doubly-secretive strategy for self-heroization is repeated by Rorschach (the hero and anti-hero—really, he is both—who initially occupies the shifting center of *Watchmen*), when he chronicles, and so seeks to justify, his own (would-be) heroics in "Rorschach's Journal," which serves as both an homage (ironic or not) to the tradition of the detective's voice-over in *film noir* and, more importantly, as a symbolic stand-in for the projected fantasies of the comic-book as such, and one with which *Watchmen*, tellingly, not only opens but closes—and "closes" precisely by leaving *open* (however seemingly pessimistic its suggestions on this score) the question of whether or not comic books have any future.<sup>36</sup>

Why, then, do the three greatest existentialists so vehemently resist the Enlightenment suggestion that the time for heroes is past? It is important to understand that these existentialists inherited two great but conflicting traditions: On the one hand, the Enlightenment revolution (which celebrated Reason *über alles* and so stripped the holy halos from the heads of earlier saints and saviors, leaving only a "de-auratized," halo-free world), and, on the other hand, the Romantic counter-revolution (which sought to resacralize the world by recognizing that the sources of meaning always exceed humanity as it currently exists. [See Horkheimer and Adorno, 1988]). Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Heidegger recognized that the Enlightenment yielded powerful and important insights into the "transcendental" structures that make existence as we know it possible, but they also believed that the possible *should* always "transcend" existence as we know it, and so they held that human beings, in order to lead lives worth living, need to celebrate the romantic *imagination* that creates the possible as well as the enlightened *reason* that discovers the actual.<sup>37</sup> It is, however, precisely this Romantic current in the existentialists' work (succinctly expressed by Nietzsche's anti-Enlightenment quip, "not only light but also darkness is required for life by all organisms") that renders existentialism vulnerable to criticism coming from those neo-Enlightenment movements which seek to move us historically beyond our need for heroes.<sup>38</sup>

This vulnerability can be seen most clearly in the fact that Kierkegaard's *heroization* of faith stands or falls along with the fate of the hero in general. Put simply, if there can be no *heroes*, then there can be no *heroizations*.<sup>39</sup> This same vulnerability holds, albeit in a more complex way, for Nietzsche's own heroic struggle against historical nihilism, the existential mission which animates Nietzsche's work as a whole and which is at the heart of his magnum opus, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. *Zarathustra*, of course, is the text that gave us the very idea of the "superman" (*Übermensch*), Nietzsche's personification of the neo-Darwinian idea that *history is not over*, since humanity too "is something that shall be overcome."<sup>40</sup> Indeed, Nietzsche equates belief in the hero with hope for the future (as the epigraph over this chapter indicates: "But by my love and hope I beseech you: Do not throw away the hero in your soul! Hold holy your highest hope!"). Those individuals who would participate in the creation of a more meaningful future need to be inspired by the great heroes of the past, Nietzsche thought, ultimately so as to overcome these heroes and thereby become "overheroes"—or, better, "superheroes"—that is, even greater heroes for the future. The "superhero" (another Nietzschean conception) is someone who becomes a hero by superceding the hero who inspired him or her. (As *Zarathustra* says: "For this is the soul's secret: Only when the hero has abandoned her, is she approached in a dream by the superhero [*Über-Held*]" [Nietzsche, 23]).

Under the influence of the comics Nietzsche unintentionally helped inspire, we tend to think of *Superman* as a type of superhero, but on Nietzsche's view, it would be more accurate to say that all superheroes are variations of the superman archetype. (Applied to the history of comic books, this overly-reductive view can be surprisingly revealing.)<sup>41</sup> The "superman" personifies Nietzsche's idea that the creation of a future worth living requires the continual supercession of the past, while his "superhero" symbolizes the component claim that in order to help create that future, we must supercede even the *heroes* of the past. (Thus, in the fourth and final book of *Zarathustra*, Zarathustra himself finally becomes the superman only by superceding the greatest heroes of the past, "the higher men," each of whom represents a different peak of past human achievement.) One of the lessons Nietzsche drew from Darwin was that to survive in a competitive environment organisms cannot remain static but must grow and develop. By helping us supercede even our greatest past achievements, the Nietzschean

superhero serves the “constant overcoming”—or “will to power”—whereby “life” keeps itself *alive*.<sup>42</sup>

Nietzsche thus believed that without the continued emergence of new heroes, “superheroes,” we will have no *future*—whether the absence of a future means, as it does in *Watchmen*, a literal annihilation of human civilization, or, as in *Zarathustra*, the endless repetition of an old value system which becomes increasingly worn-out and meaningless to us. Since, for Nietzsche, only a superhero should dare undertake the dangerous venture of questioning the heroes of the past, this means that past heroics may be questioned only for the sake of future heroics; Nietzsche’s deconstruction of the hero never calls into question the idea of the hero as such. It is Moore who uses *Watchmen*’s two main “superhero” candidates—Ozymandias and Dr. Manhattan—to demonstrate the dangers of this Nietzschean ideal. As we have seen, Ozymandias succeeds, where even his hero Alexander the Great did not, in unifying the world, but at the cost of alienating himself from humanity by rising so far above them. Thanks to a more extreme version of this alienating transcendence, the superficially more Superman-like Dr. Manhattan becomes a “god” rather than a human being (as *Watchmen* makes clear), eventually abandoning our world in order to create one of his own.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, Nietzsche himself maintains that, however dangerous the idea of the superhero, we cannot give it up without risking the future itself.<sup>44</sup>

Heidegger, the last and most complex of the three great existentialists, explicitly chose Nietzsche as his own philosophical “hero” and so, as a faithful Nietzschean, sought to overcome Nietzsche—with all the paradox (and hermeneutic violence) this notoriously involves.<sup>45</sup> In other words, Heidegger’s attempt to supercede Nietzsche follows from an acceptance (and critical appropriation), not a rejection, of Nietzsche’s conception of the hero. In fact, with *Being and Time*’s notion of “authentic historicity,” Heidegger formalizes an idea he learned from his appropriation of Nietzsche (and Kierkegaard), namely, that the true heritage of an otherwise stultifying tradition is best kept alive via “reciprocative rejoinders,” sympathetic but critical appropriations of the “heroes” of the past in which we develop and update our chosen hero’s mission or example so that it will be capable of meeting the changed demands of our contemporary world.<sup>46</sup> Not surprisingly, then, Heidegger supercedes Nietzsche and Kierkegaard (even as he

critically appropriates their views) when, in 1927’s *Being and Time*, he deconstructs the hero, seeking to describe the structural features of the process whereby individuals and social groups constitute fundamental aspects of their own identities by “choosing their heroes.”

In Heidegger’s view, although the heroes we choose fundamentally shape our sense of self, initially we choose our heroes without even being aware that we are choosing them, and, moreover, we tend to choose from the same predetermined array of heroes as everyone else. By simply taking over a hero society has pre-packaged for us, we are doing what Heidegger calls choosing “the anonymous anyone” for a hero (*Being and Time*, 422). Whether the hero unreflexively embraced is Michael Jordan, Albert Einstein, or Marilyn Manson, such conformist (or “inauthentic”) heroization helps perpetuate the status-quo sense of what matters in life, be it athletic excellence, scientific genius, or a route to rebellion already mapped out by the status-quo—and so a rebellion which, like those contemporary political protests which accept their confinement to “pre-determined protest areas,” tends unintentionally to reinforce the very order it rebels against.<sup>47</sup> Nor am I necessarily any closer to owning my own identity simply in virtue of having chosen a more marginal figure—such as John Muir, Ansel Adams, or Julia “Butterfly” Hill—as the hero who inspires my defining existential projects (here, say, “deep-ecological” environmentalism) and so my sense of self. In terms of *authenticity* (*Eigentlichkeit*, more literally “ownmostness”), what matters is not the *type* of hero chosen so much as the *way* that hero is chosen and so made my own.

For, Heidegger believed it possible, in a “moment of vision,” to step back from the heroes we have “always-already” chosen, adopt a second-order perspective on those choices, and choose again, in full awareness that we are choosing a hero, and that doing so *lucidly* can help us own our own lives in a way that will restore our sense of the meaning, weight, and integrity of our actions.<sup>48</sup> With such “authentic” heroization, what is crucial is the “reciprocative rejoinder” mentioned earlier, whereby we critically appropriate our heroes by interpreting and updating their “mission” so that it speaks to the changed demands of our own world. In this way we keep alive what our hero stood for in our own lives, rather than simply admiring our hero from afar, worshiping them from a safe distance. When we choose our heroes *inauthentically*, we do not really have to do much (to “Be like Mike,” apparently



I simply need to drink Gatorade), and, moreover, our society will subtly reassure us that we have made the right choice (since, sticking with this example, our society continually reinforces its ridiculous overemphasis on athletic excellence).<sup>49</sup> When we choose our heroes *authentically*, however, we take more upon ourselves (here, I would actually dedicate myself to *being* like Mike, and I would also have to take responsibility for my interpretation of what that demands), and the result is much riskier (for I am likely to *fail* to be like Mike).<sup>50</sup> If we choose our heroes authentically, we, like Ozymandias at the end of *Watchmen*, will not be able to find any reassurance outside ourselves that we have made “the right choice,” and like Heidegger himself (when he chose to believe in the initial promise of Hitler’s “revolution”), it is always possible that we are making a horrible mistake.<sup>51</sup> Authentic heroics require learning to live with this uncertainty. Following in the footsteps of our heroes thus encourages us to follow Nietzsche’s exhortation to “live dangerously,” to risk an absolute commitment (a commitment in which our very identity is at stake), since only such a risk, Kierkegaard argues, can give existential weight and meaning to our lives.<sup>52</sup>

## VI. SPARKS IN THE DARKNESS

If we look for people who made no mistakes, who were always on the right side, who never apologized for tyrants or unjust wars, we shall have very few heroes and heroines.

—RICHARD RORTY (45)

In the end, *Watchmen*’s postmodern ambivalence concerning the hero places it somewhere between the Enlightenment rejection of, and the existentialist commitment to, the idea of the hero; and in this, *Watchmen* reflects a tension underlying our own age. For, even if one believes that there is something admirable in the desire to live without heroes, the problem remains that we have not woken up and walked with our eyes wide-open into the clear light of a post-heroic tomorrow. Instead, we as a culture have simply discovered the decadent pleasure of destroying the heroes we create. Indeed, building up sham heroes only to destroy them the next week or month—once the fare only of the tabloids—seems to have become our most popular

national pastime. Concealed, however, behind this spectacle of a “star-studded” popular culture saturated with “malicious joy” (*Schadenfreude*, a German word for an increasingly American disposition) is the fact that we not only degrade our sham heroes (in whose company I would include not only Joe Millionaire, American Idol, and their ilk, but almost all our precious “stars”), we also ignore or quickly forget the real heroes who emerge despite it all (Julia Hill, Rachel Corrie, Mark Bingham, to name but a few), heroes with the capacity to disrupt our cynical complacency, realign our felt-understanding of what matters, and so give focus to our guiding sense of self. When greatness as such is suspect, and quickly subjected to vicious persecution, in the end we are left with only conformity, cultural banalization, and the triumph, by default, of sad mediocrity. Although I look forward to a dawn beyond our twilight of the idols, our dusk of “stars” made mostly of paper-thin tinsel (easily torn and foresworn), I do not believe we are entering into—or *should* seek to enter—a time without heroes, a post-heroic age.

I would suggest instead that when a genre seems to commit suicide—as philosophy did (with Kant, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein) and as the superhero comic did (with *Watchmen*)—this apparent suicide is usually better understood as an attempted martyrdom, that is, a sacrifice with a redemptive intent, a would-be rebirth (even if in a different form). When the greatest representatives of a genre seek to end it, this is perhaps because they sense (on some level) that no field can long survive without being periodically revitalized by such sacrifice and rebirth. It is no coincidence that many of the comics which followed *Watchmen* sought to respond to its challenging deconstruction of the hero, and that the result greatly enriched the comics medium as a whole. More than fifteen years later, mainstream comics continue to occupy a post-*Watchmen* landscape, one in which *Watchmen*’s ambivalence about the hero has become nearly ubiquitous.<sup>53</sup> Even in the darkest of contemporary comics, however, a careful reader can still recognize the sparks from that ongoing struggle to imagine and create the kinds of heroes who will prove themselves capable of inspiring the denizens of this complex and morally ambiguous world,<sup>54</sup> a struggle which seeks to keep alive (as the dream of the hero, with all its risks, has always done) our hope for a better future. This hope (which, really, is hope itself) we can deconstruct but never destroy.<sup>55</sup>

## NOTES

1. This functional definition of the hero suggests that one of the dangers of a society with enemies but not heroes—a society we sometimes seem to be becoming—is that such a society will only define itself negatively, in terms of what it is *against*, and so become ever more empty, hostile, and closed-in upon itself.
2. Between 1933 and 1938, this latter group included Heidegger himself. On this issue, see below and my “Heidegger and the Politics of the University,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 41:4 (2003), pp. 515–42.
3. It is important to realize that “deconstruction” (*Destruktion, Abbau*) is not the same as “destruction” (*Zerstörung*). I will discuss the particular deconstructive strategy employed by Moore below, but for a broader philosophical discussion of “deconstruction,” see my “Ontotheology? Understanding Heidegger’s *Destruktion* of Metaphysics,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 8:3 (2000), pp. 297–327.
4. In referring to what may well be one of the great works of postmodern literature, I shall nevertheless avoid the embarrassed euphemism, “graphic novel”; Moore himself rejects this term as a ploy meant to help market comic books to adults. Still, it is difficult to ignore the embarrassment to which such marketing responds. (Michael Chabon, in what is basically a graphics-free “graphic novel” about comic books, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* [New York: Picador, 2000], recognizes “the opprobrium and sense of embarrassment that would forever . . . attach itself to the comic book” [p. 75], but also describes the truly American art form of the comic book as “something that only the most purblind of societies would have denied the status art” [pp. 574–75]; see also *Unbreakable*, in which Shyamalan makes his case for comics.) A few words about the philosophical study of comic books may thus be in order here, as a maximally unapologetic apology for what follows. As the great sociologist Pierre Bourdieu observes, academics are the dominated members of the dominant class. Owing to this position in the field of cultural capital, we tend unconsciously to turn our backs on our humbler origins and become eager apologists for “high-brow” cultural commodities—opera, orchestra, foreign films, fine wine—while remaining blind to (if not deluded about) the fact that we thereby help legitimate the class divisions such rarefied cultural commodities serve. At the same time, we also tend to denigrate “low-brow” mediums such as rap music, Hollywood movies, or, heaven forfend, comic books. (See Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984]). Such unreflexive prejudices may be common, but they are unworthy of the *philosopher*, who should indeed *know (themselves) better*. As something of a “high-brow low-brow,” a philosopher (or “lover of wisdom”) who has long felt love for and drawn wisdom from Hollywood, rap, and—longest of all—comic books, I could hardly refuse when Jeff McLaughlin kindly asked me to contribute a chapter for *Comics as Philosophy*. This title is provocative; *Comics as Philosophy* implies (although McLaughlin himself may not agree) that we should treat comics as *philosophy*, clarifying and discussing the ideas these comics contain, instead of just using comics to illustrate pre-existing philosophical theories. Indeed, demonstrating the inherent philosophical content of a comic is a more fitting way to give comics their intellectual due than by simply showing that they make for good philosophical examples, which (as in the case of Hollywood films) far fewer would deny.
5. When discussing the maturation of mainstream comic books, Moore is always quick to share the credit (and blame) with Frank Miller. One thinks immediately of *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns*, but those seminal comics, which changed the genre forever, were made possible by earlier work, including Miller’s brilliant work on *Daredevil* and Moore’s radical transformation of *The Swamp Thing*. For abundant testimony to Moore’s worldwide influence, see Gary Spencer Millidge, ed., *Alan Moore: Portrait of an Extraordinary Gentleman* (Leigh-on-Sea, England: Abiogenesis Press, 2003).
6. This perhaps helps explain why I would choose to go to Berkeley rather than to the more overtly heroic Air Force Academy (one of my own early versions of what Sartre called a “radical choice,” a significant parting of the ways on the path of life), and why *Watchmen* would so fascinate me; clearly (in retrospect), I was already in the grip of that ambivalence concerning the hero that *Watchmen* intensified.
7. *Watchmen*’s first and last images are essentially the same, a device which (as in Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra*) conveys the circularity of the text and so signals the necessity of rereading it. See Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons (with colorist John Higgins), *Watchmen* (New York: DC Comics, 1986–1987), issue #I, p. 1, panel i and issue #XII, p. 32, panel vii. I will henceforth refer to *Watchmen* by simply listing the issue, pages, and (where relevant) panel numbers, respectively (here: I. 1.i and XII. 32.vii). See also *Watchmen* XI. 23.iii, where the young man who is always reading the comic (within the comic) hints: “I gotta read ‘em over.”
8. As *Watchmen* XI. 1.iv–v suggests: “this jigsaw-fragment model . . . aligns itself piece by piece. . . . These reference points established, an emergent worldview becomes gradually discernible.” Moore explains (in “The Alan Moore Interview”) that “with *Watchmen*, what we tried to do was give it a . . . kind of crystalline structure, where it’s like this kind of jewel with hundreds and hundreds of facets and almost each of the facets is commenting on all of the other facets and you can kind of look at the jewel through any of the facets and still get a coherent reading.” This multidimensional polysemy leads Moore to add (echoing remarks Nietzsche made more ironically about *Zarathustra*) that *Watchmen* is “tailor-made for a university class, because there are so many levels and little background details and clever little connections and references in it that it’s one that academics can pick over for years.” That is true, but for the most part I leave the monumental task of cataloguing all of the interconnections to others (several web sites undertake this daunting task). I might warn them, however, that if they can exhaustively explain the meaning of an artwork, they have thereby undermined its status *as art*, as I explain in “The Silence of the Limbs: Critiquing Culture from a Heideggerian Understanding of the Work of Art,” *Enculturation* 2:1 (1998); see [http://enculturation.gmu.edu/2\\_1/thomson.html](http://enculturation.gmu.edu/2_1/thomson.html).
9. *Watchmen* uses several other devices to multiply meanings, including, most notably, the story within a story (the books, article, journal, magazine, and comic book within the

- comic book), which then become (multiple) allegorical frameworks for interpreting the story in which they are placed. Each issue also employs a different recurrent theme and symbol (named in the issue's title and revealed in a quote given fully, and revealingly, only on that issue's last page). My favorite example of this device is issue five, "Fearful Symmetry," in which the entire issue is almost perfectly symmetrical in its panels, colors, figures, etc. (To see this, compare the first and last pages, then work inward to the amazing centerpiece on pp. 14–15, in which the two pages are a "fearfully symmetrical" reflection of one another). Here the point is not merely a display of formal mastery, but to convey the symmetrical relation of life to death—an important and recurring theme throughout the book (cf. V. 15.i with V. 12.xiii).
10. (Cf. Freud, "The 'Uncanny,'" in *Collected Papers*, vol. 4 [New York: Basic Books, 1959], esp. pp. 394–99.) I am thinking of Socrates' notoriously unanswerable elenctic questioning, his ruthless midwifery in which all his interlocutors' philosophical children either are stillborn or quickly euthanized. The philosophical answers only begin to survive with Plato, whose figure of "the stranger" (in "Parmenides") proposes the patricide, the murder of he without whom one would not be, a murder which is justified as necessary to make room (by clearing the conceptual space) for a better future.
  11. (On this revisionary history of comics, see esp. *Watchmen* V. 29–32.) Sridhar Pappu, "We Need Another Hero," *Salon*, 18 October 2000 (<http://dir.salon.com/people/feature/2000/10/18/moore/index.html?pn=2>).
  12. Moore now bemoans this aspect of *Watchmen's* influence, saying: "When I did *Watchmen*, I thought, great, people are going to feel compelled to look at the clever storytelling involved and they'll feel compelled to match me or better me in coming up with ways for telling stories. But instead, it seems what most people saw was the violence, the grimness, the layer of atheist pessimistic politics that was glossed over it. That's what got regurgitated and recycled" (see Moore's "Interview with Jonathan Ross," in *The Idler* (<http://www.idler.co.uk/html/interviews/rossmoore.htm>). Neil Gaiman's epic *Sandman* saga may be the only mainstream comic that succeeded in meeting *Watchmen's* challenge (of course, one needs to reread the entire *Sandman* series to appreciate this).
  13. See *Watchmen* I. 31 ("Under the Hood," 5). It is not uncommon for the fantasy genre to contain a critique of fantasy (as e.g. Anne Rice's vampire novels seek to convince us that we would not really like being immortal), and one can always suspect that such a move is motivated more by "sour grapes" than by an embrace of the human condition as such.
  14. Moore lampoons the reactionary, right-wing nature of the superhero, e.g., when he shows the heroes meeting during the Nixon years in order to discuss forming a new team to fight the evils of "promiscuity," "anti-war demonstrations," "campus subversion," "drugs" and "Black unrest" (see *Watchmen* II. 10.ii, II. 11.iv, and VIII. 29–31).
  15. See Jean Baudrillard, *The Vital Illusion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), pp. 46–49: "Everywhere we see a paradoxical logic: the idea is destroyed by its own realization, by its own excess. And in this way history itself comes to an end . . . [subsequent] history presents itself as if it were advancing and continuing, when it is actually collapsing."
  16. See *Watchmen* XI. 31 (p. 9 of "Nova Express"). Thus Moore describes *Watchmen* (in "The Alan Moore Interview") as "taking these ordinary characters and just taking them a step to the left or right, just twisting them a little bit. . . . *Watchmen* was at the time about as far as I could imagine taking the mainstream superhero comic. It seemed to take it to some place that was so completely off the map."
  17. (As Mungo Thomson reminds me, it was this pulp aspect of *Batman* that Frank Miller so influentially revived; Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* revitalized *Batman* by reconnecting it to its pulp origins.) If one views comics from a sufficient distance, one finds oneself confronting the phenomenon that Joseph Campbell—the great Jungian analyst (whose interpretations of myth demonstrate the appropriateness of applying Jung's notion of the archetype to the idea of the hero)—called *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949).
  18. See *Watchmen* I. 1.i; on this "true face," cf. VI. 17.iv–vi, VI. 21.ix, and VI. 26.iv. Rorschach's journal also replicates the detective's "voice-over" in classic *film noir*. In Greek drama, the mask amplifies the voice and so focuses, rather than hides, the person within (a point nicely conveyed in Jim Carrey's "The Mask"). Rorschach takes this so far that he disappears into his mask; Night Owl (his former partner) represents a more skeptical ambivalence toward the adoption of the mask of the hero, which (Moore implies) is a kind of "Jesus costume" through which the hero seeks to provide a kind of secular salvation (cf. VII. 8.vi–vii, VII. 24.vii, and VII. 9.viii).
  19. (For the connection between Rorschach and the comic within the comic, see V. 22.vi–vii, which speaks of "Raw Shark.") In part to head off the facile response that the idea of comics as projection is merely a projection of Moore himself, the plot of *Watchmen* VI is framed by an ingenious recurring device in which Rorschach himself is subjected to a Rorschach test, a test which he tellingly reverses so that it reveals the unconscious projections of the psychiatrist seeking to administer the test. As a result, the psychiatrist comes to understand his own careerist ambitions as social ideals the internalization of which has alienated him from what he truly cares about, namely, helping people (see *Watchmen* XI. 20.vii), thereby deconstructing these projections, putting them out of play, and so confirming the motto from Nietzsche which bookends the issue: "If you gaze into the abyss, the abyss gazes also into you." See *Watchmen* VI. 28.iv–ix. In the end, the psychiatrist recovers his humanistic ideals, but then dies (in a noble but futile act of ordinary heroism) because of them. This ending is thus more ambivalent about the hero than the conclusion of the comic within the comic itself, which straightforwardly contends that the attempt to become a hero turns one into a monster. This contrast represents an ambivalence about the future of the hero that *Watchmen* itself concludes by posing (see notes 28 and 44 below).
  20. See *Watchmen* VI. 28.vii–ix. It is consistent that Rorschach, a character whose very name is synonymous with "projection," should project his understanding of reality as projection onto the world.
  21. At least for those who do not simply delude themselves. See *Watchmen* I. 5 ("Under the Hood," 5) and compare *Watchmen* VIII. 27–28 (in which the old, naively

- optimistic—indeed, delusional—hero is, in effect, slain by the public). See also VI. 10.iii, in which Rorschach describes his mask (made from the fabric of a space-aged dress ordered by Kitty Genovese—one of *Watchmen*'s many brilliant little details) in symbolically *absolutist* terms: "Black and white. Moving. Changing shape . . . but not mixing. No grey. Very, very beautiful."
22. *Watchmen* IV. 32 ("Dr. Manhattan: Super-Powers and the Super Powers," p. III). The first image after that sentence is of a barely disguised "Jolly Roger" (see V. 1.i), a skull and crossbones which, here, symbolize Rorschach and the projection of meaning onto an empty world. The implication—that Rorschach's nihilism is itself a clear-eyed view of the scientific world—is reinforced at VIII. 18.ix.
23. *Watchmen* I. 21.iii; see also the main debate in IX (through which Moore implies that poetry, not science, will save us). As Night Owl explains (in another of Moore's ironically self-referential passages), "in approaching our subject with the sensibilities of statisticians and dissectionists, we distance ourselves increasingly from the marvelous and spell-binding planet of imagination whose gravity drew us to our studies in the first place." When Night Owl contends that: "A scientific understanding . . . does not impede a poetic appreciation of the same phenomenon. Rather, the two enhance each other," he expresses the hopeful side of Moore's deep ambivalence toward comics (see *Watchmen* VII. 30–31), an optimism which is reinforced by the fact that Night Owl comes out of retirement at the end of *Watchmen* and that *Watchmen*'s signature smiley-face is restored by the recognition that science covers-over the miraculous nature of the everyday (see esp. IX. 27.i–iii).
24. (Remember that the greatest Greek heroes—such as Achilles and Hercules—were *demigods* seeking among mortals to prove themselves worthy of immortality.) When Dr. Manhattan departs for Mars, the juxtaposed text wonders about "the cold distant God" in whose hands fate rested: "Was He really there? Had he been there once, but now departed?" Similarly, Rorschach describes his own defining epiphany in such terms: "Looked at sky through smoke heavy with human fat and God was not there. The cold, suffocating dark goes on forever and we are alone." See *Watchmen* III. 21.vii and VI. 26.ii, (Oblique references to the holocaust abound in *Watchmen*; see e.g. II. 30 ["Under the Hood," 8] and the many appearances of "Krystalnacht").
25. In a baldly self-referential moment, Moore (under the pretext of analyzing the pirate comic contained in *Watchmen*) writes: "In the final scenes, thanks to the skillful interplay of text and pictures, we see that the mariner," i.e., Ozymandias, "is in the end marooned from the rest of humanity in a much more terrible fashion." See *Watchmen* V. 31 ("Treasure Island Treasury of Comics, 61").
26. This helps explain why "The Comedian"—who embraces the nihilism of the world for the licentious freedom it permits him (as if following Dostoyevsky's flawed maxim, "If God is dead, then everything is permitted")—does not seem to be a hero (see *Watchmen* IV. 19.vi).
27. Why approach *Watchmen* from this angle? The very title, *Watchmen*, as a reference to Juvenal's "*Quis custodiet ipsos custodes*" ("Who watches the watchmen?" or, as we might

- now say, who polices the police?), is intended primarily as a political question (see *Watchmen* XI. 18.ix, which quotes from the speech J. F. K. was, according to Moore, supposed to read the day he was assassinated: "We in this country, in this generation, are by destiny, rather than choice, the watchmen on the walls of world freedom"), but this reference also implicitly raises the problematic question of the hermeneutic frame (problematic because it seems to generate an infinite regress): From what perspective can one justify one's own interpretive perspective? (On this issue, see Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987], 37–82). One of the definitive theses of postmodernity is that there can be no privileged interpretive "metanarrative" (whether Marxist, Freudian, existential, or even postmodern) from which to adjudicate between competing interpretive perspectives. (See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984]). This postmodern thesis may itself be self-undermining; if it is itself a metanarrative, then it is caught in a paradox of reflexivity (see Reed Way Dasenbrock, "Slouching Toward Berlin: Life is a Postfascist Culture," in *Fascism's Return*, ed. R. J. Golsan [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998]). The sentiment dovetails nonetheless with Heidegger's claim that no one interpretive frame can exhaust a true work of art, as well as with Heidegger's warning against the endless task of seeking to situate one's own perspective (to "get back behind one's thrownness"), two points I explain in my aforementioned "The Silence of the Limbs." In this context, it is also interesting to recall the frequently noted fact that in comics, the action always happens outside or between the frames, which are themselves frozen, and that this is especially true of *Watchmen*, which refuses to employ force lines, blurred backgrounds, and any of the other comics shorthand for conveying a sense of motion *within* a single, framed panel. (I owe this latter point to Mungo Thomson).
28. See Isaiah Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); see also Habermas's virulent, neo-enlightenment suspicion of heroes: "It seems to me that whenever 'heroes' are honored, the question arises as to who needs them and why. . . . [O]ne can understand Bertolt Brecht's warning: 'Pity the land that needs heroes.'" (Giovanna Borradori, ed., *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003], p. 43). Cf. Emmanuel Levinas's depiction of Romanticism's "heroic conception of human destiny," in which "the individual is called upon to loosen the grasp of the foreign reality that chokes it," in *On Escape* [1935] (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 49–55; Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?," *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, trans. Ted Humphries (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), 41, 44. Ironically, in order to advocate the sober self-guidance which is supposed to lead us beyond such heroizations, Kant himself employs an unmistakably *heroic* rhetoric, proclaiming that "the motto of Enlightenment" is "*Sapere Aude!*" ("Dare to Know!"), and pitting Enlightenment "resolve and courage" against the "laziness and cowardice" of "lifelong immaturity" (41). This is not merely a rhetorical inconsistency, but helps us see that Kant advances his critique of *other-heroization*

- (heteronomy) from the perspective of a particular kind of *self-heroization* (autonomy). In other words, rather than a critique of heroization in general, Kant pits one kind of hero (the self) against another (the other). (Of course, the issue of Kant's role in—and the full consequences of—the historical movement of liberal individualism demands a much more careful evaluation than is possible here).
29. Our unconscious solution to the long-anticipated arrival of the millennium was ingenious and revealing; we simply transformed our millennial despair into a technical problem (the quickly forgotten “Y2K Bug”) and then channeled our fears into practical attempts to solve this “glitch in the programming.” This explains why the dangers of the “Y2K Bug” were so incredibly exaggerated (namely, because it served as a stand-in for our deeper fear of the end of days or apocalypse), and so revealed our (pre-9/11) optimism that we could “de-bug” death from the human genetic “program” (perhaps the ultimate goal of science).
  30. See *Watchmen* XI. 32 (p. 10 of “Nova Express”); ironically, here “the world’s smartest man” confuses the subconscious with the unconscious. Showing himself to be an extreme disciple of Enlightenment, Ozymandias will later speak of ushering “in an age of illumination so dazzling that humanity will reject the darkness in its heart,” and, as he says this, he finds himself confronting a “disappointed” god-figure. See *Watchmen* XII. 17.ii–v.
  31. Mungo Thomson informs me that this plot device comes from a 1950’s episode of *The Outer Limits* called “The Architects of Fear” (starring Robert Culp, who later figured prominently in the 1980’s TV show “The Greatest American Hero,” in which the action, drama, and comedy revolve around the Moore-like question, “What happens when you give a ‘normal,’ gainfully-employed, family-man superpowers?”) and points out that Moore cites “The Architects of Fear” at the end of *Watchmen* (it is playing on a TV in the background in XII. 28.ii–iii). When asked, “Who’d believe an alien invasion?” Ozymandias responds by quoting Hitler’s dictum, “People swallow lies easily, provided they’re big enough” (*Watchmen* XI. 36.iii). *Watchmen*’s climax thus complicates Slavoj Žižek’s hypothesis that: “Disaster films might be the only optimistic social genre that remains today, and that’s a sad reflection of our desperate state. The only way to imagine a Utopia of social cooperation is to conjure a situation of absolute catastrophe.” See Žižek, “Disaster Movies as the Last Remnants of Utopia,” interview with Noam Yuran, in *Ha’aretz* (English edition), 15 Jan 2003.
  32. Compare *Watchmen* XII. 27.i with XI. 13.vi and XI. 23.i; the obvious parallels between Ozymandias and the would-be savior of his hometown in the pirate comic imply that Ozymandias’s “innocent intent” to save the world has destroyed him, undermining not only the “schoolboy heroics” of the traditional superhero but also his own darker and “less obvious heroism” (XII. 17.i). The very name *Ozymandias*, moreover, implicitly connotes the futility of all dreams of empire. (In *Watchmen*, Ozymandias personifies that empire of capitalist imperialism which wears a liberal-democratic mask; Moore was responding to Thatcher’s neo-Reaganite policies.) As Moore knows (but does not say in *Watchmen*), the arrogant lines quoted from Shelley (on XI. 28: “My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:/Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!”) are, in Shelley’s poem, found engraved on the base of an ancient monument which now lies shattered in the sand. (This fuller context helps one understand Dr. Manhattan’s final answer to Ozymandias: “Nothing ever ends”; see XII. 27.v).
  33. By the end of *Watchmen*, Ozymandias changes the fragrance line he sells from “Nostalgia” to “Millennium” (see XII. 31.iv) because he has helped shift the cultural mood from a retrospective pessimism to a forward-looking optimism. Yet, “Millennium,” a word with strong thanatological resonances, is an odd name for a product meant to embody the victory of “Enlightenment” over “extinction,” and so helps (along with the neo-Nazi aesthetics of the advertising campaign for “Millennium”; one of many ways in which Moore associates Ozymandias with Nazism) to signal the darker undercurrents of *Watchmen*’s conclusion.
  34. I hope that my employment of heroic terms (“the three greatest”) in a context concerned with questioning such terms will not be seen as begging the question with which we began. I do recognize that it tips my hand a bit, or rather it would, if my epigraph had not done so from the outset by indicating one of the philosophical intuitions guiding me here, *viz.*, that, however problematic, heroes are indispensable for history-making (which, in turn, is needed to transcend the nihilism of the age). I should perhaps also respond to the criticism that I myself am guilty of heroizing Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Moore. On Nietzsche and Heidegger’s closely related definitions of the hero (see below), this is true: I not only admire aspects of their thought, but have made those aspects part of my own philosophical identity through a series of creative interpretive appropriations (or philosophical *introjections*). There are, of course, many senses in which I do not want to be anything like them (!); were that not the case, my self-constituting interpretations of their work would not need to be particularly creative. If, as I maintain in my opening paragraph, a hero *functions* as an individual or community’s idealized self-projection, a projection which helps focus their guiding sense of self, then certainly these thinkers (among others) play that role for me. This entire chapter, moreover, in that it argues *against* the dispensability of heroes, can be understood as a response to the charge that this heroization constitutes a *criticism* of my work.
  35. Although both Kierkegaard and Rorschach keep their identities secret, their masks confer rather than disguise their “true” identities, amplifying and focusing (as in Greek drama) the self, character, or “personality” speaking through the mask. (See note 12 above).
  36. See *Watchmen* I. 1.i; XII. 32.vii; and cf. V. 12.vi; *Watchmen* is “closed” only in the sense that a line is closed when it is made into a circle. On the question of the dispensability of the hero, Moore himself now seems deeply ambivalent. In “The Alan Moore Interview,” Moore says: “at the time I think I had vain thoughts, thinking ‘Oh well, no one’s going to be able to follow this, they’ll all just have to stop producing superhero comics and do something more rewarding with their lives.’” Yet, the penultimate scene of *Watchmen* is of two aging heroes preparing to return to their “adventuring” (see XII. 30.ii).

37. It is perhaps not too great an over-simplification to point out that a significant strain of the intellectual (or "spiritual," *geistlich*) history of the last few centuries can be sketched as a series of battles in the on-going conflict between Enlightenment and Romanticism: The Enlightenment throws off the "dogmatism" of a religious worldview; Romanticism rejects the triumph of Enlightenment rationality as sober but unsatisfying; the existentialists seek to rehabilitate Romanticism's call for meaning within a broadly Enlightenment framework; Berlin and other liberals reject this Romantic counter-revolution as politically disastrous and call for a return to the Enlightenment; postmodernists rebel against this return to the privileged metanarrative of Reason while nevertheless reviving its suspicion of heroes, master-concepts, and so on.
38. See Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, p. 10. These "neo-Enlightenment" views may (as with Berlin) or may not (as with postmodernism) share the Enlightenment belief that reason is sufficient for happiness, a view Nietzsche denigrates as "Socratic optimism" in *The Birth of Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
39. If nothing can be an X, then nothing can be made into an X. No liquid, no liquefaction; no heroes, no heroization, and so on. (Someone might object, e.g., that while there are no demons, there are certainly *demonizations*. But a person "demonized" is transformed rhetorically into something that does not actually exist, which helps explain why such rhetorical moves are so objectionable. As I observed in note 35, however, even Kant himself proved incapable of abiding—in his *rhetoric*—by this strict logic of Enlightenment). A would-be "enlightened Kierkegaardian" might try to avoid this problem by insisting that, since Kierkegaard distinguishes the "knight of faith" from the "tragic hero" in *Fear and Trembling*, he does not in fact "heroize" faith. Yet, not only is Kierkegaard's distinction quite *idiosyncratic* (since a *knight* is the very paradigm of the medieval hero), but the distinction turns on Kierkegaard's questionable claim that we can *understand* the tragic hero, but not the knight of faith. (Can one really "understand" Hector, let alone Oedipus? Not, I would argue, without becoming *like* them). As Andrew Cross shows, moreover, Kierkegaard's knight and hero stand in a relation of isomorphic interdependence, each completing the other (each is the other's "better nature"); see Cross, "Faith and the Ethical in *Fear and Trembling*," *Inquiry* 46:1 (2003). If Cross is right, and I think he is, then even *within* Kierkegaard's idiosyncratic conceptual vocabulary, one can say that Kierkegaard gives us a "poetic heroization" (or "heroic poeticization") of faith. (Obviously, however, the concepts of the hero I have analyzed here are significantly broader than Kierkegaard's own). Alternatively, the post-modern Kierkegaardian might try to argue that we cannot say that the Knight of Faith is a heroization of Kierkegaard himself, since Kierkegaard entirely disappears behind (or into) his pseudonymous masks (with even his journals being masks). That, however, only extends the parallel with Rorschach (who also disappears into his masks), while missing the general point that there is almost never a superhero without an unknown "secret identity" (seeming exceptions, like Wolverine, fit the pattern on closer examination), and the fact that this secret identity is not only unknown to the hero's admirers, but is usually popularly perceived as the very opposite of the hero (think, e.g., of the "nerdy" Peter Parker and Clark Kent, who look cowardly because they are always "running off when trouble starts," and also of the vicious caricatures of Kierkegaard in *The Corsair* creates a distance which helps *motivate* their continued heroics (potentially into the kind of vicious shame/exhibition cycle Moore analyses in works such as *Miracleman*).
40. See Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 124: "I teach you the superman. Humanity is something that shall be overcome."
41. On this point, see Moore's *Supreme* and Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, 74–77 and *passim*. The creation of America's famous "Superman" in 1938 was (just like many of the earlier comics) in part an ideologically-motivated response to the Nazi's glorification of Nietzsche's superman (an idea which, in so far as the Nazis conflated it with Nietzsche's "blond beast," they completely misunderstood). Chabon nicely uses his own "Superman" character, "The Escapist," in order to transform the common anti-comics charge of *escapism* into a celebration of comics' "noble" and "necessary" ability to liberate the imagination and so help us escape oppressive regimes and realities (see 575–76, 582, 620). It would be interesting to read Chabon's heroization of escape—escape as resistance to tyrannical "senses of reality" (as Berlin might put it)—in the light of Levinas's earlier idea that "escaping is the quest for the marvelous, the 'need to get out of oneself, that is, to break that most radical and unalterably binding of chains, the fact that the I is oneself'" (*On Escape* [1935], 53, 55).
42. Max Scheler appropriates this Nietzschean idea when he characterizes the "hero" as the exemplary embodiment of "life values." See Manfred Frings, *The Mind of Max Scheler* (Milwaukee: Duquesne University Press, 1997).
43. See *Watchmen* XI. 14.vii. Ozymandias describes his own transformation into a "superhuman" (*Watchmen* X. 32), but Moore makes clear that the catch-phrase announcing Dr. Manhattan, "The superman exists, and he's American," was actually a corruption of, "God exists and he's American" (cf. IV. 13.i and IV. 31). (Moreover, Dr. Manhattan's human name, Osterman, connotes Easter (*Oster*), and thus divine rebirth, and by the end of *Watchmen* he is no longer this human being; see *Watchmen* XII. 18.ii).
44. For a (Nietzschean) critique of Nietzsche's dangerous conception of the hero, see Alexander Nehamas, "Nietzsche and 'Hitler'" (in J. Golomb and R. S. Wistrich, eds, *Nietzsche, Godfather of Fascism?* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002]). Interestingly, Moore's Ozymandias calls into question Nehamas' rejection of Nietzsche's "evil hero" by providing precisely the kind of example Nehamas himself finds "difficult to imagine" (101).
45. For a sympathetic reconstruction of Heidegger's controversial critique of Nietzsche, see my "Heidegger on Ontological Education, or: How We Become What We Are," *Inquiry* 44:3 (2001), 243–68.
46. See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 429–39. Jürgen Habermas revealingly (if, once again, reductively) traces back to Kierkegaard Heidegger's understanding of historicity (often misleadingly translated as "historicity"); see Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), 5–11.

47. This is not to denigrate Marilyn Manson (or Einstein, or Michael Jordan); what really matters, for Heidegger, is that such a “hero” be chosen *authentically* by an individual as his or her hero, with all that entails (see below).
48. “The authentic repetition of a possibility of existence that has been—the possibility that Dasein may choose its hero—is grounded existentially in anticipatory resoluteness; for it is in resoluteness that one first chooses the choice of that which first makes one free for the struggle of loyally following in the footsteps of that which can be repeated” (Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 437). See also Charles B. Guignon, “Authenticity, Moral Values, and Psychotherapy,” in Guignon, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
49. None of us are immune from such influences, of course. A few years ago I attended a meeting of the North American Nietzsche Society in which several eminent Nietzsche scholars read papers on the subject of “Nietzsche and Sport”; one after another, they maintained that Nietzsche would have loved the same culturally-banalizing sporting events they themselves seemed to worship—from afar.
50. In *Watchmen* too, the “public” (nicely embodied in the shifting scene surrounding the appropriately Kierkegaardian figure of the newspaper vendor) is distinguished by the refusal of its members to take responsibility for their decisions.
51. See Hubert L. Dreyfus, “Mixing Interpretation, Religion, and Politics: Heidegger’s High-Risk Thinking,” in Christopher Ocker, ed., *Protocol of the Sixty-first Colloquy of the Center for Hermeneutical Studies*. In the final pages of *Watchmen* (XII. 27.iv–vii), Ozymandias seeks reassurance from Dr. Manhattan (who has become nearly omniscient), asking him, “I did the right thing, didn’t I? It all worked out in the end.” Dr. Manhattan answers, “Nothing ever ends.” Ozymandias’s confidence is clearly shaken, and the final image of him (looking away from his own shadow, which is now larger than he is) leaves open the question of whether “the world’s smartest man” will be able to live with the uncertainty concerning his own heroics.
52. See Hubert L. Dreyfus, *On the Internet* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), esp. pp. 73–107. See also Žižek’s critical appropriation of Dreyfus’s Kierkegaardian critique in “Rhetorics of Power,” *Diacritics* 31:1 (2001), 98–103.
53. This work includes Frank Miller’s revival of Batman, *The Dark Knight Returns* (which, like so much of Miller’s work, embraces the very hero Moore’s deconstruction showed to be so problematically right-wing, even while developing Moore’s ideas of superman as a dupe of the government and, later, as a kind of god), Neil Gaiman’s *Sandman* (a brilliant *Bildungsroman* of the fantasy genre which masterfully reconstructs the hero *Watchmen* deconstructed), Moore’s own later work (such as *Miracleman*—an insightful, neo-Nietzschean fable, *Supreme*, *Top Ten*, *Tom Strong*, and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*), as well as—at the very heart of the mainstream—the death and multiple rebirths of *Superman* himself and the very popular *Ultimate* work by Brian Michael Bendis, Mark Millar, and many others.
54. For a discussion of three such recent attempts (comics in which “The Thing” is Jewish, “Rawhide Kid” is gay, and “Captain America” is Black), see Alan Jenkins, “Minority Report,” *The Nation*, 12 May 2003, 36–38.

55. I would like to thank Mungo Thomson, Brent Kalar, and Gideon Yafee for generously sharing their brilliant *Watchmen* insights while I was working on this chapter (I wish I could have incorporated them all), Anne Margaret Baxley, Kelly Becker, Hubert Dreyfus, Kirsten Thomson, and an anonymous reviewer for extremely helpful feedback, the audience of the 25 April 2003 philosophy colloquium at UNM for a stimulating discussion, and Jeff McLaughlin for encouraging me to write this chapter in the first place. (I dedicate it to the philosophers of the future, still happily exiled in the comic book aisles).