

provide an account of sociopolitical transformation resulting not in the abolition of oppression but rather in its redistribution, not in the end of thymotic striving but rather in its becoming coerced into pursuits other than those of war or wealth, and not in a peace that is equated with justice but in a peaceableness that is enforced by the terrors of a most outrageous form of injustice. In Kurt Vonnegut's science-fiction satire *The Sirens of Titan* and Alan Moore's metafictional superhero comic *Watchmen*, we are confronted with tales portraying the salvation of humanity and the planet, but through means that can only be recognized as horrifying. For in both narratives, world peace is won not only through deception and genocide, but also extorted by means of myths concocted by the very perpetrators of the slaughter, imposing new illusions that effectively blackmail the world into abstaining from its violence.

SUPERHERO GEOPOLITICS

"Nothing ends, Adrian. Nothing ever ends." So runs the enigmatic reply to a question about whether a certain morally questionable deed will eventually be vindicated by its results. The dialogue is, however, complicated by the fact that the act in question refers to the deliberate killing of three million people, as well as by the detail that the response is uttered by an indestructible and immortal superhuman entity possessed of a virtually omniscient consciousness. The latter is a blue-skinned superhero named Dr. Manhattan, who has, as is typically the case, acquired his powers in a freak laboratory accident, while his interlocutor, Adrian Veidt, alias Ozymandias, is a former masked hero who has just executed a horrifying conspiracy to avert nuclear war and usher in a new age of global peace. For in the days leading up to Ozymandias's orchestrating what appears to be an alien attack on New York, an attack that in spite of its being a hoax nevertheless takes the lives of half of the population of the city, tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union had escalated to the point where the two adversaries have begun active preparations for nuclear strikes against each other. The shock of the ensuing carnage and mass death in Manhattan has its intended effect, as the superpowers draw back from the precipice of mutual annihilation with pledges of peace and mutual as-

sistance in the face of this unforeseen and unprecedented threat to the human species. Yet Ozymandias derives no comfort from his superhuman interlocutor's total knowledge, as from Dr. Manhattan's transcendent perspective, the concern with human survival is merely an anthropocentric prejudice. As even Ozymandias himself has earlier said of Dr. Manhattan, whose active involvement in promoting the expansionist and militarist policies of the United States has triggered the geopolitical crisis threatening to unleash the war to end the world, the ideological dilemma posed by left-wing and right-wing rivalries is for him akin to choosing between red ants and black ants.

Watchmen, written by Alan Moore and drawn by Dave Gibbons, is perhaps the most ambitious and ground-breaking narrative in the history of superhero comics, a work renowned for the unprecedented depths of its thematic complexity, historical reflection, and visual lyricism. A limited series that appeared in twelve installments starting in 1986 and subsequently collected into a graphic novel, *Watchmen* frequently avails itself of metafictional devices to reflect on the genre of superhero fantasy, but it investigates the medium by placing its costumed adventurers in a realistic world governed by power politics, rather than the juvenile, idealized universe of moral certitudes in which the upholders of truth and justice do battle against the forces of darkness. Although the initial purpose of the superhero team, called the Minutemen, is to combat urban crime, the activities of these masked vigilantes come to blur into the netherworld of covert operations, presidential conspiracies, imperialist wars, and, finally, the aforementioned plot to prevent nuclear holocaust by staging an extraterrestrial attack on Manhattan. Indeed, it is impossible to say with any certainty whether the costumed adventurers in *Watchmen* are to be considered heroes or villains, as they either serve or are otherwise forced to come to terms with the brutal and feverishly expansionist policies of a belligerent American administration, which makes full use of the strategic advantages provided by superheroes in prosecuting its wars and fomenting coups against uncooperative governments. Moore turns the familiar comic book icon of Superman, the noble and indomitable hero who defends truth and justice, on its head with the premise that if superheroes really existed, their powers would be made to advance the interests of the

state in its pursuit of geopolitical power, unless, of course, these superhuman beings were to turn on the ruling authorities and make themselves the masters of the world.⁶

The major characters in *Watchmen* include the Comedian, a violent and sadistic government agent; Rorschach, an unhinged vigilante whose draconian zeal for punishing criminals has made him wanted by the law; Nite Owl, an ornithologist in retirement from crime fighting; the Silk Spectre, a woman who was compelled by her mother, a famous ex-heroine, to train in martial arts and take up the profession; Ozymandias, a self-made industrialist and renaissance man whose companies have a stake in almost every sector of the economy; and finally Dr. Manhattan, the only character in the novel who actually possesses superhuman abilities, having acquired near-omnipotent powers in a nuclear accident. Moore modeled these characters after the superheroes featured by Charlton Comics in the 1940s, who present a representative cross-section of the familiar archetypes of the genre—the patriotic crime-fighter and war veteran (the Peacemaker), the hero who makes use of futuristic technology (the Blue Beetle), the invulnerable champion with godlike powers (Captain Atom), the female warrior (Nighthshade), the martial artist trained in the mystical wisdom of the East (Thunderbolt), and the street-wise vigilante who conceals his face behind a mask (the Question). Although these characters have been long overshadowed by their more familiar counterparts such as Marvel Comics' patriotic hero Captain America, the technology-powered Iron Man, and the most familiar figures from the universe of DC Comics (Superman, Wonder Woman, and Batman), Moore's revisionist realism endows these archetypes with a density of characterization and a striking array of idiosyncrasies that achieve a novelistic complexity. For example, Rorschach is haunted by his childhood as the bullied son of a prostitute, the vicious and ruthless Comedian loses his triumphal swagger when he discovers a joke at which even he cannot laugh, the humane and scholarly Nite Owl is plagued by self-doubt and a sense of helplessness, and the Silk Spectre finds that leaving behind a career that she had always resented has only led to a different form of imprisonment as the consort of a god. Dr. Manhattan, after becoming publicly exposed as a cancer threat, exiles himself from the world and begins to look back on his achievements and betrayals with regret and sorrow.

Thanks to the interventions of its superhero agents, the United States enjoys a series of untrammelled successes in its struggle against its communist adversaries. The major crises of the Cold War are given outcomes quite different from what took place in real life, working for the most part to the benefit of Richard Nixon and his administration. The Viet Cong are routed by Dr. Manhattan, with a conquered and unified Vietnam becoming the fifty-first state, and the journalists investigating the Watergate scandal are murdered by the Comedian, who also rescues the American hostages from Tehran and helps topple a series of leftist governments in South America. The beginning of the story finds an increasingly frustrated and demoralized Soviet Union protesting U.S. military incursions into Afghanistan. One of the few reversals for an aggressive and triumphant Pentagon mentioned in the course of the narrative is the public exposure of a scheme to unleash lethal diseases upon the population of Africa.⁷ Real-world historical personages such as John F. Kennedy, Gerald Ford, Henry Kissinger, Alexander Haig, and G. Gordon Liddy make appearances, sharing jokes with the fictional protagonists, awarding them medals, and weighing the advantages of a nuclear first strike against their Cold War rivals. Richard Nixon himself is able to serve five terms as president, thanks to the victory in Vietnam and to the strategic superiority accorded the United States by the presence of his blue-skinned, divinely powerful operative. Such revisions of real-world history, which are often conveyed by a seemingly innocuous and easy-to-overlook subsidiary details, such as a piece of graffiti or the front page of a newspaper (the headlines of which are often partially obstructed by the frame or by some everyday object like a coffee cup), come together to form an astonishingly detailed sociopolitical backdrop for the main storyline.

The narrative itself commences with a mysterious homicide. A man falls to his death after being thrown out of a luxurious high-rise in New York City. The police are dismayed by the clues at the scene: the victim had worked in some diplomatic capacity, and a photograph in his living room shows him standing next to Vice President Ford. Furthermore, the deceased, named Edward Morgan Blake, possessed a robust, well-muscled frame and had to be thrown hard enough against the window to shatter reinforced glass. Fearing the intervention of vigilantes into their investigation, one detective suggests to his partner that they pass the crime off to

the public as the work of the drug-addled thugs who terrorize the streets of Manhattan. It is left to the fugitive crime fighter Rorschach to unravel the alter ego of the homicide victim as the Comedian. Masked vigilantes having been made illegal eight years earlier in response to a strike by law enforcement officers, Rorschach's stubborn and relentless effort to punish criminals has made him into an outlaw hunted by the police. The Comedian, on the other hand, was, along with Dr. Manhattan, an exception to the Keene Act, being exempted from mandatory retirement on the basis of his working exclusively for the government. Concluding that the likeliest explanation for the Comedian's death is a conspiracy targeting current and retired costumed adventurers, Rorschach sets out to warn his former teammates from the Minutemen that their lives might be in danger. He visits in turn his former partner Dan Dreiberg, alias the Nite Owl, now a solitary, middle-aged bachelor leading a life of quiet anxiety; Adrian Veidt, alias Ozymandias, a much-admired celebrity philanthropist who retired and revealed his identity before the police riots that forever tainted the costumed vigilante in the eyes of the public; and finally Dr. Manhattan and his lover Laurie Juspecky, the former Silk Spectre, who reside on the grounds of a military research center. None of Rorschach's former teammates, knowing him to be both paranoid and jingoistic, are particularly pleased to see him, or inclined to give much credence to his mask-killer hypothesis.

Yet little more than a week later, an assassin makes an attempt on Veidt's life, and, after failing to gun him down, dies from swallowing a cyanide capsule before he can be interrogated. The same night Rorschach himself is led into a trap and captured by the police, who act on information regarding his whereabouts from an anonymous phone call. But most significantly, for its potentially apocalyptic consequences, Dr. Manhattan, during a TV interview, is confronted with evidence that he has given terminal cancer to his friends and associates. Reeling from this public humiliation, the superhuman with annihilating powers quits the earth for a solitary exile on Mars. The departure of the living weapon responsible for American strategic supremacy emboldens the Soviets, who, seeing the opportunity to reverse their setbacks, promptly mount a full-scale invasion of Afghanistan. Shaken by this double blow, Nixon and his advisors begin drawing up plans for a nuclear strike, in the ludicrous hope that a pre-

emptive attack might destroy enough of the Soviet arsenal to spare a few sections of North America from utter destruction.

The rest of the narrative thus unfolds with the world teetering on the brink of nuclear Armageddon. Moore uses secondary characters to convey the atmosphere of collective dread and anxiety that takes hold as events escalate toward a nuclear conflagration. An elderly newspaper vendor provides a running commentary on the standoff as it deteriorates from one day to the next, with reports of tanks massing in Eastern Europe followed by those of Soviet forces crossing over into Pakistan, while detectives Fein and Bourquin, who investigate the Comedian's murder and apprehend Rorschach, brace themselves for a rash of killings driven by an all-devouring despair; they are called in to handle a murder-suicide, in which a father has killed his daughters before taking his own life. Stung by his sense of helplessness in the face of this crisis and conjecturing that the real object of the attacks on costumed heroes was the removal of Dr. Manhattan, perhaps in order to ignite World War Three, Dreiberg decides to defy the law and resume his costumed identity as the Nite Owl, so as to continue the investigation begun by his former partner. Assisted by the Silk Spectre, he breaks Rorschach out of prison. The two men, acting on the information that every one of the associates of Dr. Manhattan who had fallen ill with cancer was at one time employed by the same company, are able to piece together enough evidence that points to Veidt, a professing pacifist and humanitarian, as the mastermind behind the attempts to murder his fellow masked adventurers and the perilous escalation of geopolitical hostilities.

They confront Ozymandias at his retreat in Antarctica, only to be roundly beaten by the preternaturally agile overman and self-styled disciple of Alexander of Macedon and Ramses II. Having subdued his visitors, Ozymandias matter-of-factly explains to his former teammates his plans for ushering in a new age of peace. Realizing that the unrelenting antagonism of the superpowers would doom them to mutual annihilation, and that a world economy based on the ceaseless production of arms made such a catastrophic outcome increasingly unavoidable while destroying the environment in the process, Ozymandias has arrived at the conclusion that any solution to this dismal impasse would have to be commensurable with

the extreme and intractable nature of the problem itself. In the manner of his predecessor, Alexander, who, when confronted with an unsolvable enigma in the Gordian knot, simply cut it with his sword, he would save the earth from nuclear holocaust by means of "history's greatest practical joke," teleporting a genetically engineered monster into New York City, to fool the nations of the world into believing that they are all threatened by the invasion of an alien species. Rorschach reminds Ozymandias of the latter's admission that his corporation had not succeeded in making teleportation a viable means for transporting living bodies across space, to which Ozymandias breezily answers:

It works *fine*, assuming you want things to *explode* on arrival. Teleported to New York, my creature's death would trigger mechanisms within its massive brain, cloned from a human sensitive . . . the resultant shock wave killing half the city (emphases mine). (XII: 26)

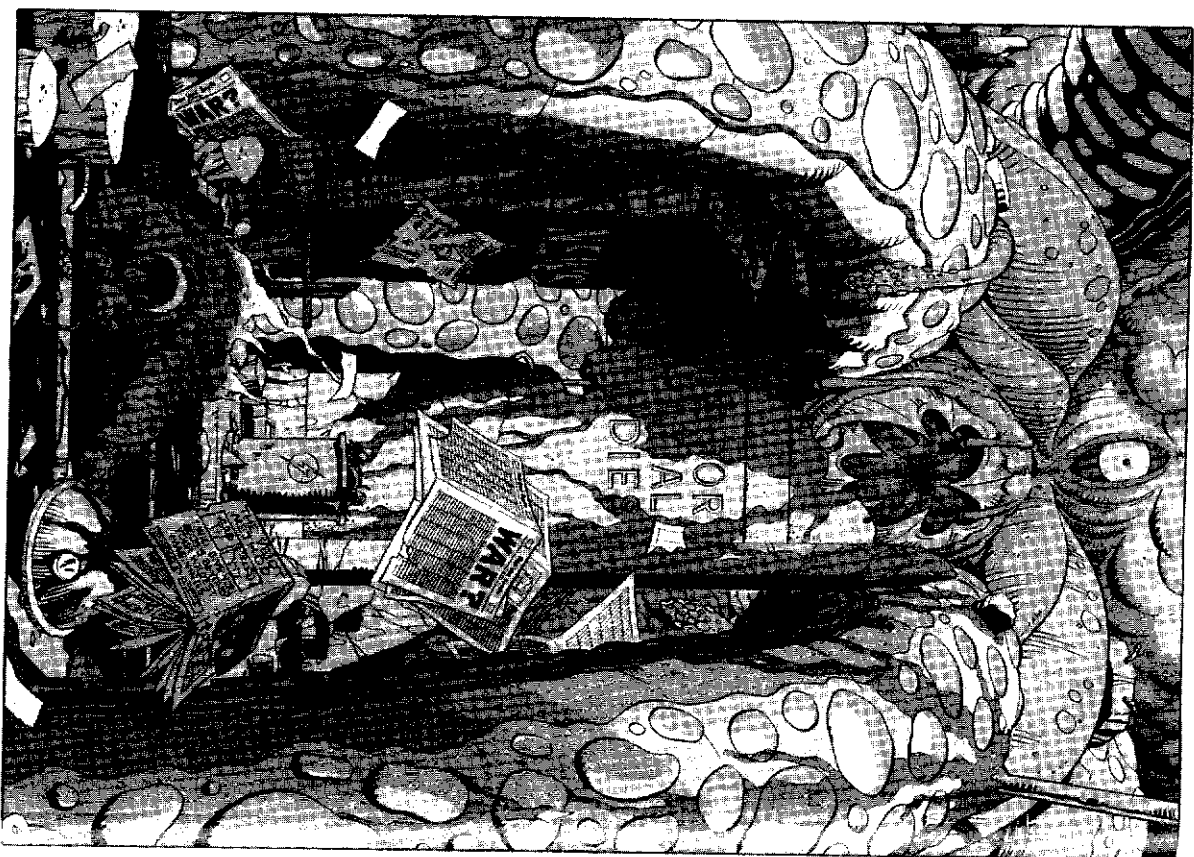
Nite Owl cannot bring himself to believe Veidt's story and asks him when his insane scheme was to be set in motion. Moore makes Ozymandias's reply an occasion for self-referential irony—the Machiavellian *Übermensch* states that he is not the clichéd evil genius found in juvenile adventure stories who boasts about his plans just before their execution, giving the heroes the opportunity to save the day at the last minute: "Dan, I'm not a *Republic* serial villain. Do you seriously think I'd explain my masterstroke if there remained the slightest chance of you affecting its outcome? I did it thirty minutes ago . . ."

UTOPIA PLUS MASSACRE

The panels that follow are remarkable for depicting the horrific carnage unleashed by the materialization of an enormous tentacled creature in midtown Manhattan by means of a strikingly unorthodox layout. On the final page of the narrative's penultimate chapter unfolds a series of six narrow frames, all but one of which show the linked pairs of all the significant noncostumed and fictional (i.e., nonhistorical) secondary characters on a city street at midnight being taken aback by the sudden manifestation of a blinding radiance. On the page's next row six more frames portray an elderly news vendor and a boy being driven into each other's arms

as they are overwhelmed by the devouring light (XI: 28). The bottom of the final panel is left fully blank, next to which is a citation of the final lines from Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem, "Ozymandias" ("Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!"). The concluding chapter begins with seven pages that are each filled by a single large panel—the first is of blood running down a clock, followed by a frame showing two mounds of corpses, a crowd of fans felled in the middle of a violent punk rock concert at Madison Square Garden, the arms of those about to stab or strangle now draped over the bodies of their would-be victims in a permanent gesture of assault (XII: 1). Drawing back from the stadium to the street in a manner that mirrors the movements of a tracking shot in film, a garishly purple tentacle becomes visible above the shattered windows of the stadium (a banner indicates that one of the bands is called "Krysalnacht") and corpses strewn over the street, lying in pools of blood. Three more full-page panels show the dead bodies of the secondary characters—a street peddler selling wristwatches, detectives Fein and Bourquin, a prominent criminal psychologist and his wife, a butch taxi driver and her estranged girlfriend—before framing the still-smoking bodies of the news vendor and the adolescent boy clinging to each other (XII: 3–6). Above them loom the hulking remains of a massive squidlike creature, its single unblinking eye and circular mouth obscenely mimicking the shape of the human clitoris and vagina (XII: 6). Greenish fluid seeps from its tentacles, which puncture the concrete and are impaled on the streetlights, like the grotesque and insatiable tendrils of a weed boring through a gravestone.

Yet what might be most unsettling about this portrayal of mass death is the haunting atmosphere of absence and muteness it creates. There is not a single word or thought bubble in the full-page panels; the reader is confronted by a landscape filled by the objects of human production that have become voided of any living human presence, as inert and detached as the evidence at the scene of a crime. Although pieces of concrete and broken glass litter the streets, the buildings remain intact, as is reckoned to take place after the detonation of a neutron warhead. In the background of the third panel, an airship can be seen having crashed into a building, its tail wings protruding from the damaged edifice like an unexploded bomb. Behind the airship looms a skyscraper, made visible against the night



A STRONGER LOVING WORLD

The fake alien, engineered by Ozymandias and teleported into New York, kills half of the city's inhabitants. From *Watchmen*; copyright 1986, 1987 DC Comics; all rights reserved; reprinted with permission.

sky by its lights. The only signs of movement are the reddish smoke that rises in thin streams from the buildings and the water that gushes out of a broken hydrant. Newspapers flutter in the air above the faces recognizable as those of the secondary characters, their alarming single word headline, "War?" now taking on a cruelly mocking resonance.

And yet we are invited to read this extended scene of death and destruction as the signifiers for the near-miraculous founding of a new and peaceful order, a golden age of international cooperation and solidarity, and regard the three million victims as a necessary and unavoidable sacrifice, the price to be paid for rescuing humanity from extinction. Indeed, the costumed heroes who track Ozymandias to his Antarctic lair find themselves trapped by a supremely fiendish version of the pallid dilemmas one finds in undergraduate ethics textbooks: Is it ever right to lie? Should one commit murder if that person's death will result in a cure for lethal diseases? Would you allow an act of injustice to go unpunished if the lives of billions depended on it? As might be expected, Ozymandias's former comrades are brought around without much difficulty into consenting to keep secret the truth behind the slaughter in New York. As Dr. Manhattan, who has teleported back to Earth, concludes, "exposing this plot, we destroy any chance of peace, dooming earth to worse destruction," while the Silk Spectre, after being the first along with her former lover to witness the horrors in the city, rationalizes, "all we did was fail to stop him saving earth" (XII: 20). The only one among them who does not accede to Ozymandias's proposition is Rorschach ("Not in the face of Armageddon. Never compromise"), who is shortly afterward incinerated in the Antarctic snows by Dr. Manhattan before he can set out on the long voyage back to the United States to expose the truth and punish the crime.

This is not to say that the narrative finally endorses, however cautiously, the methods by which Ozymandias coerces the nations of the world to embrace the path of peace or the decision of the other heroes to refrain from pursuing justice or revenge, whether for the murder of one or for the slaughter of millions. Although the closing pages of the graphic novel portray a world still flush with elation and delight at having been delivered from the destructive forces it has itself unleashed, the narrative strikes a final note not of closure or resolution associated with the dawning of a new age of universal peace, but of disconcerting openness. A dull-witted

assistant, aptly as well as ironically named Seymour, at a rabidly right-wing magazine is told by the editor to reach into the "crank file" of unsolicited materials to pad out the upcoming issue, their customary rants against the Soviets having become taboo with the onset of an era of international reconciliation. His hand hovers over a stack of correspondence in which Rorschach's journal, documenting the course of the investigation that led him and Nite Owl to Ozymandias, sits quite prominently. Indeed, Veidt's chosen *nom de guerre*, in recalling Shelley's famous poem, unavoidably pronounces the ultimate futility of any human undertaking, the unbending exigency of oblivion that greets conqueror and slave alike across the wastes of time.

Further cracks appear in the artifice of Ozymandias's utopia when he lies to his former teammates about the fate of his Vietnamese servants. Although Nite Owl and Rorschach do not even bring up the subject, Ozymandias assures them that the three men—political refugees from the fifty-first state to whom he had provided asylum—had become drunk and died of exposure after opening the roof of his tropical greenhouse, when in fact Veidt had poisoned them. It is difficult to overlook the incongruity of an overman who orchestrates the murder of millions yet feels the need to lie about the deaths of three individuals, but such an apparently minor discrepancy is suggestive of the moral abyss above which the residents of utopia must levitate if they are to disprove the fact of their survival as a miracle. For the disconcerting sense of open-endedness that closes the narrative arises less from the terrible consequences of the public learning of the truth behind their survival than with the dissolution of truth by survival itself. The vicious dilemma with which Moore closes the narrative—the choice that opposes truth, war, and the annihilation of the Earth on the one side to lies, peace, and the well-being of the world on the other—evokes those severe and insoluble antinomies, associated with Plato but also found in Melville and Dostoevsky, that illuminate by virtue of their uncompromising harshness the inexorable and merciless character of the unwritten laws of the world. In *Watchmen*, as in Melville's *Billy Budd* or Dostoevsky's "Grand Inquisitor," we find no less striking examples of what Hannah Arendt calls "goodness beyond virtue" in Rorschach's unconditional fidelity to his vocation and "wickedness without vice" in the salvation achieved by Ozymandias's act of mass slaughter.⁸

Ozymandias, in comparison to the noticeably "ethnic" features of the wiry and baby-faced Rorschach or the rotund and self-effacing Nite Owl, not to mention the forbidding and unearthly Dr. Manhattan, incarnates the costumed hero as a Homeric or Aryan ideal—he is fair-haired, handsome, charming, and charismatic, a star in his own right who is much admired for his humanitarian work and known for his left-wing politics. It strikes one as almost redundant that the actor who is reputed to be seeking the presidency in the new and peaceful world that Ozymandias has brought into being—Robert Redford—is the celebrity whose good looks and political orientation make him as likely a model as any for the former masked hero himself. Ozymandias's given name, Adrian Veidt, brings into play a very different series of associations, evoking on the one hand the mercurial Roman emperor Hadrian, noted by Edward Gibbon for his equal aptitude for wise leadership and tyrannical excess, and on the other the German film actor Conrad Veidt, whose career was distinguished by his portrayal of such sinister characters as Cesare Borgia, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Ivan the Terrible, and the devil, and whose fearfully grinning expression in *The Man Who Laughs* served as the inspiration for the Joker, the primary antagonist in the *Batman* comics.⁹ It is, furthermore, noteworthy that the role for which Veidt is most famous is that of Cesare, the somnambulist who is hypnotized into carrying out a series of murders in the expressionist film classic *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. The gesture of linking the cunning puppeteer of world history with a mesmerized, blank-faced killer whose consciousness is trapped in a perpetual twilight between sleep and wakefulness adds a further layer of irony to the contrast between Ozymandias, the superhero most admired by the Left, and his counterpart on the Right, the Comedian, the emblem of American militarism and expansionism whose revered status allows him to give free rein to his most vicious desires and brutal impulses.

Whereas the cruel and sneering Comedian is shown taking immense delight in butchering enemy combatants or gunning down his pregnant Vietnamese mistress in a fit of rage after she has slashed his face for trying to abandon her, the violence committed by Ozymandias, with the exception of his murder of the Comedian, is cold and detached, on the order of pressing a button that results in the deaths of millions. Yet, does not the catastrophic upheaval he engineers make actual the left-wing progressivist

dream of a peaceful and enlightened sociopolitical order? Doesn't Ozymandias fulfill the paradigm of the successful revolutionary leader, whose unyielding determination to create a new society and to impose a new historical epoch leads him to contemplate and carry out a series of actions from which most other human beings would shrink with horror and revulsion?¹⁰ He is, after all, willing to acknowledge fully the grievous human cost involved in achieving his goal of rescuing human civilization from the devastating consequences of its technological mastery and its insatiable drive for power. It is as though Moore, through his character Ozymandias, says to the liberal sympathizers of progressive revolutionary change, you long for a peaceful and humane political order but remain too tender-hearted to come to grips with the harsh truth that revolution is warfare and entails violence. If such an undertaking is to succeed, it will involve the deaths of innocents. So why not confine the inevitable butchery to a single horrifying event, the incalculably beneficial outcome of which will be the abolition of war? Like the fascist who contends that true patriotism consists of the willingness to commit a crime on behalf of one's country, the sacrifice of one's morality being more arduous than merely giving up one's own life,¹¹ Ozymandias justifies his humanitarian act through the perverse ethical framework of an unavoidable duty to engage in evil: "someone had to take the weight of that awful, necessary crime" (XII: 27).

Unlike those who dream of a revolutionary transformation of social conditions without taking into view the bloody cataclysms entailed by such a sweeping undertaking, Ozymandias refuses to divorce utopia, as most utopians do, from the terrors of the apocalypse but grants it its proper place within the latter's overarching framework of rejuvenating destruction and shattering deliverance. This authentically harsh political innovator realizes that he cannot entrust the implementation of his program to the automatic improvement of productive forces, nor can he rescue the nations from their destructive entanglements by offering incentives in the form of unalloyed benefits; rather, what is needed is a mixture of overpowering intimidation and inexplicable generosity, a gesture of astonishing cruelty that simultaneously satisfies the deep-seated desires of those whom such an act is intended to terrorize. As in Machiavelli's account of how Cesare Borgia secured the favor and won the stunned gratitude of the inhabitants of Romagna by arranging for the brutal murder of his ruthless and effec-

tive lieutenant, Remiro de Orco, once the latter had succeeded in his task of pacifying the anarchic and unruly province, Ozymandias manages at first to "stupefy" his former comrades with the spectacle of the murder of millions and then "appease" them with the prospect of universal peace as the direct consequence of that slaughter.¹²

Ozymandias's plot resembles in its elements the world-historical contrivances of the time-traveling lawgiver and philosopher-king Winston Niles Rumfoord in Kurt Vonnegut's *The Sirens of Titan*. Rumfoord, a Newport, Rhode Island, patrician who has come into possession of the most powerful source of energy in the cosmos, uses it to assemble a deliberately ineffectual and woefully ill-equipped army on Mars to mount an invasion of the Earth. According to Rumfoord's plan, his army, recruited from among the pitiable and the thwarted, lamentable failures in their worldly ambitions, is to be massacred all over the globe by enraged and indignant populations rising up to defend themselves. To their shock and consternation, the peoples of Earth soon discover that they have annihilated a pathetic and poorly armed invasion force, which includes in its ranks sizeable numbers of unarmed women and children who thus never posed any real threat to them. As guilt overtakes the winners of this lopsided war, Rumfoord launches the second phase of his program—to use the killings as the foundation for a new religion to ensure the peace of the world: "Earth's glorious victory over Mars had been a tawdry butchery of virtually unarmed saints, saints who had waged a feeble war on Earth in order to weld the peoples of that planet into a monolithic Brotherhood of Man."¹³ As Rumfoord himself puts it in his own chronicle of the war, "Enough of these fizzles of leadership, in which millions die for nothing or less... Let us have, for a change, a magnificently-led few who die for a great deal."¹⁴

Rumfoord draws on his predictive powers to introduce a religion of universal guilt that roots out the autonomous, self-affirming subject of liberal modernity and puts in its place the self-scourging and self-moritifying subject resembling that of the Middle Ages. In place of selfish individual freedoms and the preoccupation with maximizing one's opportunities for self-gratification, the people in this new golden age are instead intimidated or encouraged into becoming relentlessly absorbed in limiting and thwarting their natural advantages, whether physical, emotional, or intellectual, by "handicapping" themselves. Those who are vigorous and healthy burden

their bodies with iron weights and chains, those who are blessed with physical beauty hide their features under thick glasses or masks, while the erudite take into wedlock the determinedly anti-intellectual and those with strong amorous desires pledge lifelong fidelity to their physically unappealing spouses. Humanity becomes unified and consoled under the warmth provided by a universal and collective hair shirt.

The very grotesqueness of Rumfoord's revolutionary order speaks to its greater truth value over the more conventional utopias associated with the progressive political ideologies, not least insofar as it recognizes the inestimable merit of mobilizing hardship for the purposes of securing lasting social harmony. For Rumfoord can be said to take to heart the Hobbesian tenet that felicity consists of "a continual progress of desire, from one object to another," and thus that no political order can endure if it does not arrive at the proper management of human restlessness.¹⁵ If, as E. M. Cioran observes, the yearning for utopia arises out of the calamitous denial of the principle that the "disadvantages of satiety" are "incomparably greater than those of poverty," Rumfoord's utopia remedies human insatiability—and the stagnation that stimulates the craving for the "novelty and spice of disaster," by imposing upon its inhabitants a new (and medieval) way of life that is both strenuous and demanding.¹⁶ By channeling competitive desire, through the mediation of a collective and insurmountable guilt, into an inoffensive asceticism that concentrates its violence upon the self, his new order, more so than the ones dreamt of by tender-hearted or murderous utopians, solves the problem of human happiness, at least for a few centuries. For the competitive nature of handicapping enables Rumfoord to preserve that vital element that the managers of dystopia are always accusing revolutionary collectives of ignoring or repressing—the category of individuality.

Like Rumfoord, *Ozymandias* calibrates his solution of saving the human race from annihilation according to his recognition of the limits of humanity's moral imagination, as manifested in his endorsement of Hitler's dictum that "people swallow lies easily, provided they're big enough" (XI: 26). Unlike Rumfoord, *Ozymandias* does not go so far as to introduce a new religion for the sake of safeguarding the decision he coerces humanity into making by repudiating evermore "the darkness in its heart" (XII: 17). If his answer strikes the reader as less stable than that of Rumfoord, it

is because, for this invisible conqueror, religion has become incapable of performing its once-salutary function of preventing society from lapsing into a "state of perpetual unrest" or the terrors of a "constant and ubiquitous repression."¹⁷ Rather than yoking the truth to the unceasing and politically salutary consciousness of guilt, *Ozymandias* dispenses with the truth altogether with respect to his foundational act, calculating that the desire for naked self-preservation, even at the price of one's active and knowing subservience to falsehoods, will trump all other demands. *Ozymandias*, no less than Rumfoord, might be said to exhibit the paradoxical qualities assigned by Machiavelli to his ideal liberator, insofar as he is the "good man ready to use bad methods,"¹⁸ but the stability and perdurability of Veidt's utopia depends on repeating the wager of Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor, who derives his authority from the readiness of the people to forsake their consciences in exchange for their physical and emotional well-being. Indeed, the cruelty that freezes Seymour's hand in mid-gesture over Rorschach's journal in the very last panel of the narrative stems largely from the likelihood that, were the public to be informed that the alien attack was indeed a hoax, they would be as little inclined as the masked heroes in acting on the truth and pursuing the claims of justice. The possibility of retaliatory or punitive violence thus recedes from view because its stakes are nothing short of apocalyptic; yet, the process of erasing the possibility of retaliation or punishment engenders that form of spiritual violence that is inflicted against those already dead—it carries out what Slavoj Žižek calls the "second death," although in this case the expunging of the symbolic identities of the victims of history takes the form of retroactively sacrificing them before the altar of necessity.¹⁹ If the present age is to be enjoyed as a utopia, then the deaths of millions on the slaughter-bench of history are merely the unfortunate but obligatory outlay for the purchase of a glorious and inescapable end.²⁰

The pointed lack of resolution at the end of the narrative thus portends the inhuman redemption of the saved, a theme Moore explores in a more explicit manner in his graphic novel about the Whitechapel murders, *From Hell*. It tells the story of Sir William Gull, the personal surgeon of Queen Victoria, who methodically hunts down and kills a group of prostitutes who have been seeking to extort money from the crown with their knowledge of a secret marriage between her weak-minded grandson,

Edward Albert Victor, and a shop-girl, with whom he has fathered a child. Gull, who fears that traditional patriarchal authority is losing its grip over the irrational powers of the feminine, performs the killings as the enactment of a Masonic ritual aimed at keeping the black magic that has sustained the age of reason and the unchallenged rule of male deities from leeching away.²¹ Standing over the unrecognizably mutilated and partially dismembered corpse of Mary Kelly, his final victim, he is given glimpses of the next century, into the world his legendary crimes are bringing into being. The avatar of the modern serial murderer undergoes a series of hallucinations, in which his surroundings transform around him from the dead woman's impoverished lodgings into the auditorium of a medical college, where he lectures on the properties of the liver, using his victim's body as a demonstration, to an audience that includes the notorious child murderers Ian Brady and Myra Hindley, as well as Peter Sutcliffe, the Yorkshire Ripper. The subsequent vision transports Gull and his victim into the sterile, fluorescent interior of an office building in the present day. Surrounded by computers and copy machines, Gull grows stricken and aghast after taking in the deadened, soulless gazes of the people who manipulate the shining implements of the age of high technology. The legendary slayer of women, driven to despair, rails in dismay and revulsion at the fate of the social order, which he has sacrificed his conscience as well as his sanity to preserve:

It would seem we are to suffer an apocalypse of cockatoos... Moreover, barbaric children playing joylessly with their unfathomable toys. Where comes this dullness in your eyes? How has your century numbed you so? Shall man be given marvels only when he is beyond all wonder?...

You are the sum of all preceding you, yet seem indifferent to yourselves. A culture grown disinterested, even in its own abysmal wounds. Your women all but show their sexes, and yet this display elicits not a flicker of response. Your own flesh is made meaningless to you. How would I seem to you? Some antique fiend or penny dreadful horror, yet *you frighten me!* You have not souls. With you I am alone (emphases in original).²²

The triumph of scientific rationality has given rise to a world at once sterile and squalid, in which the carnage Gull has taken upon himself to wreak has become reduced to the indifferent triviality of spectacle. The division of day and night, symbolized by the cosmic victory of the god Marduk over the monster Tiamat, has given way to an undifferentiated twilight, in which the blood shed by the stabbings and hackings of a host of petty devils falls resoundingly short of rousing the collective from its hedonistic trance into a new reverence for the law. What alarms Gull, to the point where he tenderly and pathetically takes into his arms the corpse he has been mutilating, is not merely the ungratefulness of a profligate, hedonistic, and self-obsessed age that fails to acknowledge its indebtedness to the crimes and brutalities, not least those of a military and imperialist nature, that have enabled it to come into being, but also the fact that it finds such actions inconceivable in the first place, dismissing them as the pathologies of benighted epochs in the grip of malevolent superstitions.

Yet for Ozymandias, it is this very readiness of the postmodern and posthistorical subject to turn its back to the brutal deeds of the past that furnishes the conditions for his utopia. Such a callous and cold-hearted, though swift and efficient, approach to the construction of an ideal political order can be easily distilled from the philosophy of history conceptualized by Alexandre Kojève in his lectures on Hegel. Kojève, who fully acknowledges that the attainment of the peaceful order of posthistory exacts a harsh moral price, goes quite further than Marx and other ideologists of progress in presenting an account of the conditions that will prevail in human society after the completion of history. Whereas the latter have typically called for sacrificing one's own well-being and interests in the struggle against unjust and oppressive social orders, the apologist for global tyranny deduces that in the final and definitive regime, oppression and coercion will not so much be eliminated as simply cease to be matters of overriding concern to a satisfied and complacent population preoccupied with fulfilling their trivial gratifications. The state of contentedness and satisfaction experienced by posthistorical individuals thus depends on the one hand on their unconstrained enjoyment of abundance and security, which they no longer regard as objects to be achieved through toil and sacrifice, and on the other hand on their being rendered apathetic to the historical accumulation of

injustices and grievances, which they reflexively disparage as the relics of a primitive and barbarous past, in accordance with the principle that the "wounds of the Spirit heal, and leave no scars behind."²³ The grievous price of achieving utopia thus ceases to be terrible once *Homo sapiens* reaches the stage at which it feels free to shrug off as unduly burdensome the moral reservations entailed by the sacrifices that have been committed for the sake of advancing the progress of history. If economic productivity and technological advancement solve the problem of human antagonism, it does so by abolishing the category of the human itself, hence Kojève's doctrine of the "annihilation of Man properly so-called" with the attainment of the realm of freedom and the arrival of the concord and unanimity enjoyed by pacified beasts.²⁴ Peace thus proves merely to be the excrescence of an excessive and slavish attachment to pleasure, which can only be safeguarded with the universal recognition that there are no causes for which it is worth living, let alone fighting.

THE CLANDESTINE PASSIONS OF DEMIURGY

Kojève unapologetically affirms the vital role of terror in bringing about the posthistorical order, on the basis that it is only through exposure to an indiscriminate and leveling form of violent death that equals are able to arrive at the mutual recognition of the other's value.²⁵ The contrivance whereby Ozymandias terrorizes the world into acting upon its universally endangered status is portrayed in tantalizingly cryptic details throughout the course of the narrative: a prominent painter draws a sketch of a bizarre, genetically engineered creature she believes is going to be used in a science-fiction film; there is a television news story concerning the search for a missing science-fiction writer; the ultra-right wing magazine *New Frontiersman* runs a story about the unexplained disappearances of several notable American artists and scientists, predictably accusing the Cubans of involvement; and, more dramatically, the Comedian breaks into the apartment of a former adversary, where he drunkenly babbles about an unsettling discovery he has made on an island in the Caribbean, a discovery that has driven him to a crushing reassessment of his life and career: "I mean I done some bad things. I did bad things to women. I shot kids! In

Nam, I shot kids... but I never did anything like, like... Oh, mother. Oh, forgive me" (II: 23). Although the suspense plot requires that Ozymandias's conspiracy be disclosed only at the very end of the narrative, Moore and Gibbons resort to an ingenious metafictional technique to relate the overwhelming and inhuman horror associated with Veidt's plan to sacrifice the lives of the millions to avert the destruction of the entire world. Commencing in chapter III, they intersperse among the panels unfolding the main thread of the narrative the actual content of the comic books being read by one of the secondary characters, a young African American boy who spends his afternoons sitting beside a newsstand run by an elderly Jewish widower. The comic book within the comic is published under the title *Tales of the Black Freighter* and features a harrowing narrative of inexorable determination and miscarried revenge. Its author is the missing science-fiction writer Max Shea, who later turns up on Veidt's private island as one of the group of leading artists and scientists hired to work on the production of a top-secret, big budget "monster movie."

The narrative in the *Black Freighter* comic, told entirely from the first-person perspective in the form of an interior monologue, begins with its hero marooned on a deserted island, the sole survivor of an attack by the brigands manning the eponymous ship, reputed to be a vessel from the depths of hell itself. Agonized by the prospect of the infernal ship sacking his home port of Davidstown, and tormented by visions of his wife and children being hacked to death by its demonic crew, he resorts to the desperate measure of digging up the gas-distended bodies of his murdered fellow sailors to provide flotation for a makeshift raft. Setting out over the sea at nightfall, he undergoes a series of horrific tribulations, which his unshakable determination to reach his hometown at all costs enables him to overcome. But each success only plunges him more deeply into the inferno of his own revulsion. Crazyed by hunger, he manages to seize with his bare hands one of the many seagulls that have been drawn to his craft by the human carrion lashed to its bottom. Shortly afterward, he vomits over the side of his craft after becoming sickened by the awareness of what he has eaten, and shrinks back in horror from the reflection of his deranged eyes and blood-caked face on the water. Assailed by sharks, which tear away at the bodies of his comrades, the protagonist drives the edge of a broken

mast through the eye of the largest of their number, which has become entangled in his ropes. This massive beast, driven wild with pain, attempts to speed away from the craft, but instead drags it along in its wake until it at last dies. The sailor takes grim note of the irony in the reversal of the roles of predator and prey as he rends and eats the flesh of the creature, which has in the meantime brought him into calmer waters. Having lost his sail, he drifts over the murky depths, his mind consumed by images of his dead shipmates being gradually eaten away by fish and of his beloved family being butchered by the buccaneers who are certain to have laid waste already to Davidstown. After a long and listless spell during which he clasps the arm of one of his murdered comrades while bemoaning the wretchedness and futility of human life, he leaps into the abyss, but then is bewildered by what he takes to be a malicious miracle when the waters refuse to bear him down to his death: "What new torture was this? I stood upon the calm sea, a charnel messiah unable to sink beneath it to the oblivion I craved.... I lifted my uncomprehending eyes to the heavens... and saw instead the earth" (VIII: 26).

Believing the town to have been sacked by the freebooters in the service of the devil's ship, the sailor determines that the only course for him—the reason he survived not only the brutal attack that spared none of his companions but also the unthinkable perilous and harrowing journey back to Davidstown—is to avenge himself upon the fiends who have robbed him of all that he cherishes in life. Spying the town's moneylender riding on the beach with a female companion, he concludes that the wealthy man's survival marks him as a collaborator of the pirates, and so crushes his head with a rock, before strangling the woman. He dresses himself in the dead man's clothes and rides into town under the cover of darkness. Stealing into his own house, he assaults a figure he glimpses walking in the hallway, taking him to be a guard. A horror that exceeds even the gruesome ordeals he has already endured soon wells up as he recognizes the person he has knocked to the ground as his wife, who fearfully calls out his name. Aghast at the welling up of an "understanding so large" that it leaves "no room for sanity," the sailor flees back to the beach, pursued by a lynch mob that has gathered after discovering one of the murdered bodies (XI: 6). In the distance he recognizes the black freighter approaching the shoreline, and the realization dawns on him, as he swims out to the ship

of the damned, that the everlasting servitude of his soul, and not the ephemeral riches of the town, had been the objective of the demonic crew all along. The single-mindedness of his drive to save his loved ones has paradoxically triggered the chain of events that, in effect, severs their lives irrevocably from his own: "The world I'd tried to save was lost beyond recall. I was a horror: amongst horrors must I dwell" (XI: 23).

The grisly tale of a man who, in seeking to avenge himself upon a group of devils, becomes thereby initiated into their company, serves as an example of the terrible irony whereby the ruthless actions and shocking cruelties committed on behalf of a good and noble cause work mischievously to wring from that cause its meaning and justification. The comic book within the comic is thus revealed in the end to be a prophetic corollary, ending as it does a mere four pages before Ozymandias explains the details of his scheme, to the inward struggles, the deliberations and nightmares, that a man or woman with the capacity to act on the world-historical stage might undergo while settling on a disquieting and revolutionary course of action. For it is precisely this dimension of inner turmoil and agony that is absent from Moore and Gibbons's portrayal of Ozymandias, who unveils his genocidal solution for putting an end to geopolitical conflict only after he has teleported his beast into New York City. Indeed, the first glimpse we are given of his inner life comes in the narrative's penultimate chapter, when he reminisces to his servants, whom he has just poisoned, about his youthful travels to Egypt and the lands conquered by Alexander the Great. Thus, the devouring fury and frenzied agony of the solitary mariner comes to serve as the zealous, feverish counterpoint to Ozymandias's imperturbable reserve, the impassioned and deeply human inversion of the world-historical puppeteer who calculates without prejudice and without compunction the source and nature of the threat of annihilation and coldly devises its inhuman remedy. The inverted symmetry between the avenging sailor and the Nietzschean superhero is established in the visuals by the images of the two standing in the same pose, but viewed from opposite directions—the vengeance-crazed mariner walks toward the land with the sun setting behind him, while the young Adrian Veidt wades into the sea in the direction of the rising sun. The sailor tenses his arms when it dawns on him that he is actually standing on a beach and not sinking into the depths as he had expected. Conversely, Veidt holds his arms

in a similar gesture, but seen again from the back, as he casts aside his clothes under a starlit sky while drifting into a hashish-induced reverie that purportedly awakens him to the secrets of the Pharaohs.

Apropos of the controversial reputation and enigmatic ambitions of his former teacher, Alexandre Kojève, whose lectures on Hegel were attended by the leading thinkers in France, Stanley Rosen makes the following observation: "If a proper definition of a god is one who creates a world, then Kojève's intentions were divine."²⁶ The divinity to which Kojève laid claim, according to Rosen, arises from his determination to unify theory and practice, whether as the sage who brings to completion what can be considered to be characteristically human speech, leaving nothing more to say, or in his service as a high-ranking official in the ministry of foreign economic affairs and as the trusted advisor of French presidents de Gaulle and Giscard d'Estaing in implementing the aforementioned dialectic-speculative truth concerning the historical process. The work of actualizing philosophy and transforming thereby the established sociopolitical order is the labor of a demiurge, who is best exemplified in Kojève's account by the figure of the universal tyrant, such as Napoleon or Stalin. In *Watchmen*, the demiurgic prestidigitations of its armed lawgiver are not only dissected by the allegory of the deranged sailor but also paralleled by the exhaustive level of detail with which the authors depict their alternate world.

For Moore and Gibbons mirror the demiurgic scale of Ozymandias's aspirations by the exhaustive completeness with which their creation emerges. There is a startling myriad of small details that signify the separation of the universe of *Watchmen* from the real world: cigarettes are smoked through spherical glass pipes; chickens have been genetically modified so as to possess two extra legs in place of their wings; Heinz food products have 58, not 57, varieties; the New York *Gazette*, not the *Times* or the *Post*, is the city's most popular newspaper; airships fill the skies above Manhattan; automobiles run on electricity, thanks to the ability of Dr. Manhattan to synthesize lithium in mass quantities; tandoori is more common as fast food than hamburgers; lesbians are referred to as "gay women"; those in same-sex relationships casually express affection for each other in public places; Nazi emblems are pervasive in youth culture, especially among rock bands; the practice of tying one's hair into a knot resembling that of the medieval samurai has become fashionable among both sexes; the

most popular drug on the street is a fictitious stimulant known as KT-28, with its users being called "katie's" or "katieheads"; it is fashionable for men to wear helmets, manufactured by the Veidt corporation, with ventilation holes or radio transmitters on the sides (the narrative does not specify which); Veidt is also a popular maker of athletic shoes, marked by the distinctive "V" logo. Such inconspicuous minutiae, being easy to miss during a cursory first reading, derail in effect the rapid and oblivious scanning of the panels that focuses on the suspense plot into a paranoid immersion in each individual frame for the sake of detecting some askew element.²⁷

The drive of the authors of *Watchmen* to create a stunningly complete alternate world leads them to go beyond merely referencing these frequently indiscernible details to reproduce between the chapters of the graphic novel a heterogeneous array of texts and documents, such as pages from fictitious books and magazines, psychiatric reports, and business letters. There are excerpts from a memoir written by a retired costumed adventurer, the contents of a prison psychiatrist's file on Walter Joseph Kovacs (the alter ego of Rorschach), a panegyric to the marvels of owls penned by Daniel Dreiberg (alias Nite Owl) for the fall 1983 issue of the *Journal of The American Ornithological Society*, the introduction to an academic study of the impact of Dr. Manhattan on the arms race between the superpowers, unfinished layouts from an upcoming issue of *The New Frontiersman* (complete with an editorial cartoon featuring racist and anti-Semitic caricatures as well as an amusingly discerning article lambasting the authorities for their lack of action in investigating the rash of disappearances of prominent American artists and scientists), a fawning celebrity profile of Ozymandias published in the leading leftist magazine *Nova Express*, and most astonishingly, a series of memos and ad copy from the Veidt Corporation, one of which details the phasing out of a popular line of fragrances marketed for a "time of stress and anxiety" when the "natural response is to retreat and withdraw from reality," and the impending roll-out of a new product that will be promoted by a marketing strategy "projecting a vision of a technological utopia" (X: iii).

What this letter neglects to mention, of course, is the imminent attack on New York City, while showing that Veidt's preparations for ushering in an age of global peace have not led him to neglect his financial interests, as he positions his companies to make a killing, in a more figurative sense,

from the momentous historical shift that he is about to engineer. *Watchmen*, furthermore, deftly registers the displacements and repercussions of its revisions of real world history, giving rise to forking paths that twist into satirical inversions of their real-life correlatives. Thus, the "cowboy actor" who runs for president in the 1980s is not Ronald Reagan but Robert Redford. It is the Soviet Union, not the United States, that appeals to the international community to protest foreign adventurism in Afghanistan. The quote from the *Satires of Juvenal*, "who watches the watchmen," which in the comic is linked to the legislation outlawing vigilantism, will in our world come to be cited by the Tower Commission Report, which investigated the Iran-Contra scandal and published its findings in 1987, the year the entire series was completed.²⁸ Even the fact that the stories of pirates have become the narrative staple for comic books is the result of its masked superheroes having exited, as it were, from the pages of illustrated fantasy adventure tales to live and act in the world of reality.

Yet the cumulative effect of the astonishing level of attention with which Moore and Gibbons bring their world into being is a palpable sense of suffocation, in that the world of *Watchmen* ultimately takes shape in the form of a totality that has become wholly closed in upon itself. Its profusion of discourses and plural registers of meaning serve only to reinforce and bind ever more tightly the fabric of an unassailable and immutable reality, in which is ruled out any form of change other than an abrupt and global transformation of the very conditions of existence, such as would take place with the extinction of *Homo sapiens*. Accordingly, the remark by Dr. Manhattan that "nothing ever ends" may not so much be taken as words of consolation and fellow feeling than as a neutral observation of non-human fact, attesting, perhaps, to the vitality and dynamism of subatomic particles. Moore and Gibbons evoke the constricting nature of this mortified reality by means of the repetition of certain key motifs, to such an excessive degree that the proliferation of these images overflows into an unforgiving necessity beyond the materiality of chance. Indeed, the comic frequently mimics the cinematic technique in which the spoken reference to an object is paired with a visual that, while not identical to the referent, nonetheless relates to it in some way, usually signaling the viewer to convert the object into a metaphor or synecdoche. What is striking about

Moore and Gibbons's use of this rudimentary and hackneyed method for constructing meaning out of the juxtaposition of word and image is not the fact that they deploy it for the sake of parody, although the instances in which it appears are frequently humorous. Neither can they be said to be preoccupied with demystifying the inadequacies of symbolic interpretation in the face of the irreducible ambiguities of the sign. Rather, they move in a direction deliberately contrary to the complexities attributed by deconstructionist linguistics to the material signifier, that is to say, towards a blunt and brutal reductiveness. Thus, when Laurie Juspezyk, alias the Silk Spectre, confides to Dan Dreiberg her reasons for leaving her lover, Dr. Manhattan, having become increasingly disconcerted by what she senses as his unearthly sense of detachment from human cares, she makes mention of how "the real world, to him it's like walking through mist, and all the people are like shadows... just shadows in the fog" (III: 9). In the panel that contains the dialogue bubble with the reference to "fog," steam is shown rising up from a kettle, obscuring her face.

The otherwise quotidian gestures of Dan handing her a mug of coffee and of Laurie staring at her reflection in the drink are repeated later in the narrative with gestures drawn in a nearly identical fashion — Dr. Manhattan's first lover, Janey Slater, offers him a glass of beer upon making his acquaintance, and the eyes of Laurie, as a young girl, appear reflected on a snow-globe during a reminiscence of a childhood trauma. The frame in which the famished mariner tears the flesh from the seagull that he has caught with his bare hands is followed by the image of Dan chewing on a chicken drumstick in a pose that nearly duplicates that of the avenging sailor, with an equivalent amount of flesh torn from the bone. Similarly, the most conspicuous motif in the work, the smiley-face button with a drop of blood splashed across its left eye, an image that appears on the cover of most editions, recurs throughout the narrative in a variety of distinct situations. The smiley-face button being the trademark of the Comedian, the particular image in question is shown on the very first page of the work, sitting on the sidewalk in a pool of the slain superhero's blood, after he has been hurled through the window of his high-rise apartment. The image of the smiley-face reappears to provide a humorous and alarming form of closure on the last page of the work, where it is shown

on the t-shirt of the assistant at the *New Frontiersman*, who is taking a lunch break. Ketchup drips from his hamburger to cover the left eye of the smiley-face, in the exact spot marked on the Comedian's button by his blood. A smiley-face also appears on the landscape of Mars, over the left "eye" of which the ruins of the giant clocklike structure created by Dr. Manhattan comes to rest. The fact that Moore and Gibbons choose to depict Dr. Manhattan proclaiming to Laurie his change of heart over leaving the world to its fate while standing inside a crater shaped like a smiley-face icon provides, at the very least, a partial refutation of his affirmation of life on earth as the outcome of a wondrous and miraculous chain of accidents. When Ozymandias heaves the Comedian up over his head to throw him out the window, the area around his left eye is shown covered with his victim's blood forming the same telltale splash mark. Indeed, even in a scene in which the Comedian is shown alive, in this case gleefully engaged in slaughtering a group of Vietnamese with a flame-thrower, the sweat from his face can be seen dripping right onto the icon's left eye, over the exact spot that will be stained by his own vital fluids.

Such instances of repetition compel the reader to suspect that almost every frame has its double or inversion elsewhere in the text, and thus that the events unfold in the narrative in accordance with inescapable and predestined laws, in spite of the radical and possibly annihilating openness in its final page that suspends the fate of the world. The reader is led thereby from the infernal gratitude and interpassive enjoyment secured for the people of the world by Ozymandias's necessary act of genocide to the paradoxical and mechanistic disappointments experienced by the omniscient Dr. Manhattan. He tells Laurie that her attempt to persuade him to intervene to save the earth from destruction will begin with her informing him that she and Dan Dreiberg have slept together, but then the blue superhuman expresses shock and dismay when she confesses to him the facts that he has just stated. "We're all puppets, Laurie," Dr. Manhattan tells his estranged lover, "I'm just a puppet who can see the strings" (IX: 5). To see the "strings" in the act of rereading *Watchmen* is to become aware of how the predestined character of its closing massacre is sustained by a network of relations that operates as kind of a lethal algebra whereby every equation must work out to zero, leaving no arbitrary or surplus remnant

in its mortuary closure, just as Ozymandias contrives to have the agents involved in his conspiracy killed by other agents, who in turn are liquidated by still others, until all have gone to their graves, strangled by the ropes of their partial knowledge.

Moore and Gibbons, furthermore, often place the word and thought captions relating to different levels of the narrative within the same frame, so that the content of a certain enunciation reflects directly on an action or conversation taking place somewhere else, at some other time, or, in the case of the pirate comic, in an altogether different order of reality. The captions from the pirate comic are made to present a sharply ironic counterpoint to the events in the main narrative, and vice versa. Among the myriad instances of such a play of reflections is an early juxtaposition of the pirate story with a monologue by the news vendor in which he endearingly and boastfully praises his profession, a juxtaposition that generates a kind of hermeneutic for the activity of reading the narrative itself:

Frame 2

Bernard: Lissen, I see every goddamn front page inna world. I absorb information! I miss nothing.

Mariner: Bosun Ridley lay nearby. Birds were eating his thoughts and memories.

Frame 4

Bernard: See, everything's connected. A news vendor understands that. He don't retreat from reality.

Mariner: For my part, I begged that [the gulls] should take my eyes, thus sparing me further horrors.

Frame 5

Mariner: Unheeded, I stood in the surf and wept, unable to bear my circumstances!

Bernard: The weight o' the world's on him, but does he quit? Nah! He's like Atlas! He can take it! (III: 2)

The fate of total knowledge is to provide nourishment for oblivious scavengers; the revelation of the interconnected nature of reality ignites only

the overriding yearning for blindness; the intolerable anguish crushing the marooned sailor leads him to throw off the weight of the world, but his transcendent defiance of nature only opens the portal to a predestined hell. Nevertheless, the disparity between the gruesome spectacle of the bodies of the mariner's shipmates being eaten by seagulls and the everyday representations of catastrophe that "sell the papers" initially strikes a ghoulishly humorous note, since the narrative at this point still sustains the divergence between the world of "fantasy," which finds its protagonist thrown into a nightmarish scene of horror and carnage, and the stable order of "reality" in which the experience of disaster is relegated to the passive activity of reading about events taking place in distant parts of the globe. But as these two realities draw increasingly close to each other as tensions worsen between the superpowers, the pirate comic portrays the mariner throwing himself into a series of horrific and dehumanizing actions in undertaking the improbably hazardous journey across the waters back to his hometown. The news vendor, meanwhile, is straightaway divested of his composure and self-possession by an unexpected tap on the back from Rorschach, who appears in the daylight hours as a grim-faced religious fanatic holding a sign proclaiming that the end of the world is near.

Whereas the victimized and tormented mariner, after his prayers for oblivion go unanswered, hurts himself into the reality that has taken root from his fears, Bernard grows increasingly unnerved by events beyond his control, casting about in the moments before Ozymandias's "alien attack" between voicing moral outrage over the prospect of mutually assured annihilation and taking refuge in the desperate hope that a preemptive strike will save the country from destruction: "Morally, we oughta strike first. We gotta protect our women and kids, even if theirs die. That's morally logical" (XI: 13). Bernard's claim to understand the interconnected nature of all events and his determination to face reality blind him to the fact that these connections have marked his newstand as the ground zero of the world's salvation, the nexus to which the monstrous creature will be teleported. Indeed, a young woman with a swastika tattooed on her arm, high on KT-28s, grabs the lapel of his coat and raves incoherently about a "terrible noise" followed by a "shockwave" (VIII: 25). One might say therefore that the mariner moves too swiftly to confront his most terrible fear, rushing right past it into the maw of a nightmare worse than any he

had anticipated, whereas the news vendor, like most human beings, ends by waiting—at one moment pathetically appealing to justice and in the next grimly and ruthlessly writing it off—for a terrible fate to materialize around him.

THE ETHICS OF STRIKING SECOND

The dialogue between news vendor and the mariner thus unfolds as a series of missed encounters that culminates in the outcome of death or death-in-life, and thus corresponds to the division between those who are sacrificed and those who condemn themselves to survival in the kingdom of darkness. Bernard's endorsement of the principle of "striking first," on the other hand, brings to light a fundamental distinction among the masked heroes themselves, which is manifested most vividly between Ozymandias and Rorschach. If Ozymandias is the world-historical individual who, in realizing the enormity of the dangers facing humanity, "strikes first" by imposing an audacious and repugnant measure of his own design upon the unsuspecting world to spare it from destruction, Rorschach, the ruthless and uncompromising vigilante who terrorizes the criminal underworld of New York, can be said to hold fast to the masked hero's code of punitive violence. After all, does not justice meted out by the superheroes constitute a practice of violence legitimated by its essentially reactive and belated character, as a form of always "striking second," after the first, lawless blow has been dealt? Ozymandias himself declares his impatience with the quixotic and ultimately ineffectual attempt to rectify a world thrown incessantly out of balance by the forces of disorder, deriding the vocation of the masked hero as futile for confronting only the symptoms of social ills. Like a proper liberal, he gives up his crime-fighting career in order to take care of the root causes of the evils afflicting mankind. Yet, while Ozymandias can remedy man's inhumanity to man only through a supremely inhuman act that, needless to say, violates irrevocably the singularity of his victims, reducing them to the condition of a mere means to an end, Rorschach's fanatical commitment to the practice of vigilantism as well as his pitiless embrace of violence, on the other hand, reveal an unexpectedly moral dimension in the form of a grimly stoic attachment to particular individuals and their suffering.

FROM UTOPIA

TO APOCALYPSE

*Science Fiction
and the Politics
of Catastrophe*

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