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(for Semiotics of Art and Culture)

The Hero Myth & the Apocalypse in Alan Moore's "*Watchmen*"

1. Introduction: The Power

The question of the use and abuse of power is central to any superhero story. The power to kill, the power to save, the power to transcend ordinary human limitations. It is the super-humanness of the superhero that makes him equally worthy of awe and fear. At least as early as Stan Lee's flawed Spider-Man (accused by the media for vigilante activities) and, even earlier than that, with the lone vigilante Batman (who is both feared and relied upon to fight crime in Gotham City), questions regarding the morality of the superheroes' actions have been phrased repeatedly. It is a continuation, of course, of the long tradition of myths where gods and demigods are hated and resented (but rarely opposed) because of their questionable private morals combined with excessive superpowers and, often enough, intellectual or moral shortcomings. What right do the so-called heroes, the makers of legend and myth, have to interfere in the lives of ordinary mortals, or even raise themselves above all law and morality? Alan Moore, the creator of the comic *Watchmen* - which will be the topic of my essay - has stated that *Watchmen* is to be read as a meditation on power, and this should be understood precisely in the sense described above: the power of the hero over the non-hero (the coward, the villain, and the faceless public), the power of myth-making.

In short, the power of the *super*-man over the man.

Another aspect, which is really an extension of the first point, has to do with the time-dimension of the mythical space. Here we shall turn to Joseph Campbell's analysis of the hero's journey. Although time, as such, has nothing to do with power, certain conceptions of the linear (i.e. progressive-teleological) or cyclical (i.e. recurring-pulsating) nature of temporality have very specific implications for the world at large. But whether time – history – is expected to eventually come to an end (in the linear conception) or whether time is seen as passing through long phases of

calm punctuated by periods of turbulence (in the bottleneck moments of its cyclical recurrence) - the passage of time and history involves, at certain crucial points, the expenditure of mythical energies in world-creation and world-destruction. We know from myth that gods have the power to give birth to, maintain and destroy entire worlds (as in the Hindu triumvirate - a.k.a. "Trimurti" - of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva). It should come to us as no surprise that comic book superheroes and supervillains share these roles, at least potentially: how many times do we find the plot-device of some doomsday machine that threatens to destroy the world? Indeed, this is even found in 20th century popular fiction, like Ian Fleming's James Bond novels and other atomic age thrillers where nuclear holocaust is seen as a possible scenario; indeed as the *defining* scenario. It seems that our Western world is addicted to the concept of "the end of the world", and our fiction reflects that fact.

The superhuman energies of superheroes are, in a way, excessive forces that do not belong to this world, and consequently their use must have (negative or positive) consequences for the balance of things in the world. This is why Christ must become a man only in order to raise up to heaven again after a brutal ritualistic murder-sacrifice. These kinds of rituals are rituals of time-becoming (the birth of the A.D. calendar) as well as time-ending (the end of the pagan era). They involve an expenditure of powers, like a mythical "tearing of the veil" that sends shockwaves across the whole world. If we're only so lucky, such a cataclysm is only the end of an *era*, and not an end of the *world*. However, the power to destroy whole worlds lies in the hands of almost any superhero, precisely because they are excessively non-human and carry this "cosmic seed" (Superman) or "bite" (Spider-Man) that makes them mutants. As power-wielding freaks, superheroes are forces of *imbalance*, but with the potential to *re*-balance and *re*-order the harmonic co-existence of ordinary human beings through acts of heroism and (almost cosmic) self-sacrifice. Superheroes, as demigods, with one foot in the world of the supernatural and the extratemporal, and another foot in the world of mortals, have a double duty: to maintain the world while rejuvenating, spiritualizing it. They are not divine, but their powers render them the transcendental power to exceed the limitations of ordinary human beings and, perhaps, to redeem humanity through their deeds of sacrificial selflessness, with or without public approval (see, for example, the ending of *The Dark Knight*). And even if the world is *not* redeemed in the process, only a major tragedy averted in favour of the less-than-perfect *status quo* (which is continually tainted because of the "original sin" of human beings who will continue to give rise to crime), superheroes have at least done their deed, ritualistically. This is also why Father Christmas comes once a year, and why Juhannus (or any comparable Midsummer festival) is celebrated annually in agrarian and post-agrarian societies everywhere: not because last year the same thing did or didn't work - it matters little - but because mythical consciousness is dependent on this idea of the "returning saviour" where people dream and

talk about harbingers of justice, peace and earthly renewal (like the ebb and flow of seasons) who they expect to come and deliver them justice, or rain, or crops, or pizza, or spiritual salvation, or a Playstation. Superheroes represent these excess human emotions and drives (that tie in with our expectations of the future) that make people invest their energies in rituals, magic and belief. This investment of energies gives birth to a dimension of the human psyche we can call the "mythical" or "archetypal", and its time conception is eternal, cataclysmic and fatalistic.

However, we can explain the matter even more theoretically. What *is* this realm of the archetypal, exactly, and where does it reside? I claim that we need to understand the world of myth as a world onto its own: a world separate from, but also connected to, our "real" world. Superheroes, like all mythical creatures, require the existence of "another world" to legitimate or explain their existence. This world can simply be an alternative time-line (like the New York where Peter Parker works) or a completely fictitious world in the stars. But it always involves a layer of impossibility whereby the two worlds both *are*, and *are not*, connected. For example, the immaculate conception of Virgin Mary is explained as a kind of divine emanation of the Father God's seed from an invisible realm beyond this world, so that, in fact, Mary never lost her virginity. This is because the two worlds - the world of reality and the world of myth - are never in *direct* correspondence. "Miracle" is needed for the two to merge, a kind of "rabbit out of the hat" moment, something that cannot be explained but has to be assumed. Likewise, superhero myths require the suspension of our disbelief in order for us to enjoy their stories. Whether it's God or Superman, there is an element of ridiculousness combined with religiosity that makes the system work. This is what I mean by "two" worlds: the creation of an alternative "copy" of our own (real) world, posited as a utopia, dystopia, religious dimension or futuristic vision. Myth (as fiction) is the doubling of the world.

This doubling creates a kind of spiritual effect, whereby miracles, death and eternity become palpable. Old myths were ways of condensing truths in high-information packages called allegories, which could consequently be passed on down through generations. As Joseph Campbell writes in his preface to *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, myth is a way of "telling the truth in symbolic clothing" (p.vii). This must surely mean that even modern day myths have a way of speaking to us about important things and eternal truths, albeit in a roundabout way. This roundabout way, this "symbolic clothing" is what I have called the self-splitting of the world in two, into the *real* (social-factual) and the *imaginary* (religious-fictional) part. This could also be seen as the "doubling" of reality into its conscious and unconscious parts, i.e. life's transient side on the one hand and life's eternal side on the other - the realm of Jungian "archetypal images" (pp.17-18). The important thing is that myths contain truths expressed through allegory. The effect of a myth is directly into the subconscious mind, bypassing logic and reason. This is why art, including comic

books, can appear so morally unsettling and disturbing: it can speak of one thing while claiming to speak of another thing. In short, the world of myth is the dream version of the real world.

We shall inquire into these topics (power, superhumanity, time, apocalypse) later. For now, let us take a closer look at the comic book *Watchmen*, because it gives us an insightful look at how mythology can be used against itself, despite itself, to work in the service of de-mythologizing. In fact, for mythology to feel fresh, it needs its heroes to be made look like clowns. In the world of *Watchmen*, heroes and villains are two sides of the same coin.

2. The Apocalyptic Crisis of Society

In whatever art form that reaches a certain level of self-regard and self-reflection over its own history, we can find various techniques and instances of ironic self-criticism. This is a way for an art form "to come of age", i.e. to mature, to become what it really can be. But it can "become" what it is only *through* this process of self-distantiation and self-reflective meditation on its own basic assumptions, and the overcoming of these assumptions through irony and, perhaps, moral ambiguation. Irony is self-evident: look at dada, surrealism and Andy Warhol, and what that did to visual arts. Or look at the ironic self-reflectiveness of postmodern cinema: the pastiche form of Quentin Tarantino, genre parody movies, the various remakes of old classics by Hollywood, the blending of fact and fiction in, e.g., Blair Witch Project....

Irony is also present in *Watchmen*. It is a comic book, a fairly typical one in scope and style, conforming to the standards of visual layout and graphic design of a typical DC Comics twelve-issue narrative arch. The use of irony in the book is not straightforward or pastiche-like, as it sometimes is in comics. I remember as a kid reading lots of Marvel comics, and I can tell that already in the 1990's the use of irony, "breaking the fourth wall" and the mocking of the superhero genre was a fixture of the form, if not exactly commonplace. Superheroes are rarely portrayed as simple "good guys" anymore. However, we should point out that *Watchmen*, which was written by Alan Moore and illustrated by Dave Gibbons, dates back to 1986. Its way of toying with the reader's expectations and presumptions was clearly ahead of its time, and even today holds up really well. But the most striking thing, perhaps, about this particular story is the grimness and brutal realism of its elements. The humour is not emphasized, even when the characters are patently ridiculous; and indeed, I think that the main villain, the destroyer/healer of the world(s), Adrian Veidt, is an altogether ridiculous human being, a clown, a parody, a joke. Nonetheless, the parody aspects of the super hero cult and culture in Alan Moore's vision are buried under an apocalyptic scenario of the

world's tragic (or tragi-comic) death and (potential) rebirth. That is why it rises above parody and pastiche (even if it uses techniques of both) and delivers a genre-breaking but also genre-molding piece of fiction: *it takes itself seriously enough to turn the irony into a weapon.*

So, in its combination of self-reflective irony and unconventional moral ambiguation, *Watchmen* provides a story that operates on the level of archetypes rather than appearances. It reaches for the core of the superhero genre and pulls the trigger in the face of the reader, and effectively *kills* the eschatology myth that belongs to all superhuman hero stories, by taking it to its logical conclusion: global disaster in the form of a ridiculous and preposterous event of a violent (and premeditated) rebirthing of the world by way of chaos: the renaissance of humanity through genocide - this is the story of the last chapter (# 12) in the story arch. In effect, the conclusion of the story ("ironically") reverses the roles of the hero and the nemesis. By showing the failure of the organized group of the so-called heroes to bring an end to the life-threatening plans of Adrian Veidt, the power of life-giving as well as life-taking is shown to lie exclusively in the hands of this rather silly man, this lunatic kitsch artist, who then becomes the archetypal vengeful-but-merciful God, who punishes His children only in order to give them life anew. This story carries echoes of the Apocalypse, of course, but also of the story of the Great Flood in the Hebrew Bible (which derives from the Sumerian-Babylonian myth of Gilgamesh), where the "first crop" of humans is sacrificed in order to make room for the next, superior phase of humanity. It also reminds one of the "dying god" mythos explored by James Frazer in his "Golden Bough" anthologies, and the various seasonal rites of spring, midsummer, autumn and midwinter where the cyclical nature of the universe is explained in terms of a primeval sacrifice of the old (the passing year/harvest/generation) in favour of the young (the new year/harvest/generation). The eschatology of the Christian myth goes even further: it demands and wishes for a Second Coming where final judgment is laid down upon the wicked from high. It is clearly more in line with this Judeo-Christian millennial tradition, rather than the pagan tradition, that Adrian Veidt puts his plans into action in *Watchmen*. But whatever the case, the reader is shown the ultimate consequences of the hero myth, first by "unmasking" the masked heroes (by providing extensive background stories to the individual characters) and finally by showing the morally ambivalent consequences of the benevolent rule of the philosopher-king, Alexander-incarnate, Adrian Veidt, who is tacitly elevated to legitimacy by his comrades-in-arms, who see no other choice than to go with his plans (with the sole exception of Rorschach). It is *their* surrender (the failure of the Good), not *his* madness, that shocks the reader and effectively "deconstructs" the hero mythos by reverting it to its opposite, villainy. The rift between ordinary humans and the superheroes (the "supermen", *Übermenschen*) is nothing more and nothing less than

the difference between a follower-type and the leader/hero. Superheroes take morality into their own hands; it is their destiny. The greatest hero is simultaneously the greatest villain.

In other words, Superman as Hitler, again; this, in all brutal honesty, is Adrian Veidt.

It is precisely Adrian Veidt, the unlikely villain, and an even unlikelier world-redeemer, who I shall focus on here. Likewise, I will limit my analysis to the last two chapters of *Watchmen*, because dealing with the whole story arch would be a forbidding task. Focusing on a single character has its advantages. I could, of course, spend time talking about all the many complex characters in the story, from Rorschach to Doctor Manhattan, but it is Adrian Veidt (also known as Ozymandias) who, I think, holds the "key" to the story. He is the most satirical of the superheroes, precisely because he is the most *idealistic* and, in a way, *honest*, in his narcissistic stupidity. He is to be laughed at, but he is nonetheless the only true "hero" of the novel, the only one who has the power to regenerate the world from its ashes. His idealism is the perennial idealism of the superhero culture. He alone has the courage to rise above the mediocrity of the "mere" humans. Moreover, he alone has the courage (or audacity) to rise above the factional bickerings of his fellow caped avengers and to carry through, in good faith, his uncompromising, "idealistic" vision of the future. In this sense, his heroism is unfaltering. Tragic, yes; flawed, yes... but honest.

All the other superheroes know it: next to him, they are *nothing*: "My name is Ozymandias, king of kings; Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!" These words, taken from P.B. Shelley's poem "Ozymandias", are quoted at the moment of the exobiotic apocalypse (Issue XI, p.29) represented by pure, white light. This "king of kings" (a common epithet to a jealous god like Yahweh), whose words are melded into the purifying light of the nuclear holocaust, represents the principle of the cosmic *rebirth-through-death*, as well as the superhero's potency of *supreme power*.

3. Adrian Veidt: or, how to turn Myth into Kitsch!

Before we launch deeper into the analysis of Adrian Veidt's, as it were, "ritualistic" or "theological" role in the *Watchmen* universe - in bringing about its end - let us, first, return to a statement I made earlier, calling him a "kitsch artist". What do I mean by this? As it happens, this aspect of him both makes him the archetypal hero *and* the clown-faced arch nemesis of the story.

We are back to irony. He dresses like a parody of the superhero model. He is an idealist (at least as far as it goes), but a terrible sense of style and an aggrandized sense of self-importance make his honesty seem in bad taste, like the exaggerated righteousness of American culture might seem to a European. He really likes to attach "history" (memorabilia, echoes, symbols)

to his persona, in order to write himself into real history. This is reflected in the choice of his name, too. Ozymandias, Adrian's masked alias, is the Greek name for the Pharaoh, *Ramesses II*. He imagines himself a hero, a ruler, a world-maintainer, like this great king. As it happens, Adrian's Antarctica hideout is full of kitsch artefacts and *faux* Egyptian art. He seems to think that the more one has of bad replicas, the better one's chances of reaching the original source. His great scheme (and the front corporation for his evil plans) was called "Pyramid Deliveries", which is another reference to Egyptian architecture, as well as to the so-called "pyramid schemes", i.e. shady businesses. The pyramid structure, perhaps, stands also as a kind of model for his ideal society – with him on top, of course, on the peak of the pyramid, controlling the world from his throne. At any rate, despite his love for Egyptian memorabilia (he even has a mini-obelisk and a sphinx in his garden: see *Watchmen*, chapter XII, p.7) he looks and dresses more like a Greek hero - most notably Alexander the Great, whose gigantic portraits, two separate ones, hang on the walls of his hideout (see chapter XI, pages 4, 8 and 15). In front of one of them, he begins a long monologue about the greatness of Alexander. He sees himself as belonging to the same lineage. Here are some excerpts, revealing as they are of the gigantomania and sheer tastelessness of his plans and their cosmic scope:

"Alexander of Macedonia. I idolized him. A young army commander, he'd swept along the coasts of Turkey and Phoenicia, subduing Egypt before turning his armies towards Persia... / He died, aged thirty-three, ruling most of the civilized world. / Ruling without barbarism! [...] True, people died... perhaps unnecessarily, though who can judge such things? Yet how nearly he approached his vision of a united world! / I was determined to measure my success against his. [...] I wanted to match his accomplishment, bringing an age of illumination to a benighted world. / Heh. / I wanted to have something to say to him, should we meet in the hall of legends." (Chapter XI, p.8)

He wants to subdue the world, in order to bring light to it. He half-jokingly mentions "the hall of legends" as a place he imagines himself one day ending up in. But this is a very important point about his character: he imagines his puny life as belonging, entirely, to this realm of mythical accomplishments - the building and conquering of nations, the uniting of the world and bringing forth an era of peace (through *power*, of course). Yet he saw himself as not only an imitator, but as some sort of unique individual who could bring about cataclysmic change that "the benighted world" needed. Indeed, Adrian wanted to combine rational prowess (of the military, media and society) with the irrational or unconscious or dream-world forces that also shape human life (of visions, dreams, desires and fears). This is what any true megalomaniac hero must do: attain supremacy of his own subconscious. He even describes himself as a visionary dreamer and shaman:

"The night before returning to America, I wandered into the desert and ate a ball of hashish I'd been given in Tibet. / The ensuing vision transformed me. Wading through powdered history, I heard dead kings walking underground; heard fanfares through human skulls. / Alexander had merely resurrected an age of Pharaohs. *Their* wisdom, truly immortal, now inspired me." (Chapter XI, p.10)

So, he saw Egypt as a greater might than Macedonia, and so he chose the name of an Egyptian king (albeit in Greek form) for his costumed hero. More importantly, here we have some inclinations of the complex character that is Adrian Veidt: though without style or sense of proportion, he is not stupid. Indeed, the press even calls him the world's smartest man. Perhaps even more than Doctor Manhattan – another scientist – Adrian is the archetypal "artist-scientist" (Campbell, p.24) that in classical myth is represented by the figure of Daedalus: "that curiously disinterested, almost diabolical human phenomenon, beyond the normal bounds of social judgment." (ibid)

If Doctor Manhattan is an ethereal man-angel who doesn't suffer from human passions - partially because of his abnormal constitution - and a typical "disinterested" scientist (and, later, a clearly disinterested superhero and lover), then Ozymandias represents the *idealistic* and *passionate* version of this mad scientist type. He, in Campbell's apt description, "is the hero of the way of thought - singlehearted, courageous and full of faith that the truth, as he finds it, shall make us free." (ibid.) It is hardly a surprise that both Adrian (Ozymandias) and Jon (Doctor Manhattan) could, in the end of a rather fierce bout of fighting, find enough common ground to work together, or at least make sure things didn't get any worse. Now, Jon didn't do it out of any love for Adrian, but because he knew his help was needed to minimize damage. Of course, this choice was probably made easier because the two men shared a kind of "Daedalus-complex" (of believing in rational calculation and the eschatological vision of scientific progress), and because Jon was not weighed down by emotions (unlike, say, Rorschach). In the end, it is Jon who convinces the others still alive (Nite Owl and Silk Spectre) to join the "conspiracy of silence" of the superhero-*Übermenschen* and subject the world, in lieu of alternatives, to the benevolent dictatorship under Ozymandias's rule. And, indeed, it is Jon who ends up killing Rorschach, the only remaining "authentic" hero at this point in the story - the only hero, that is, with the unlikely and unfortunate (but inevitable?) exception of Adrian himself, who now emerges, disgustingly, more and more as the hero-figure.

The other remaining candidates, Nite Owl and Silk Spectre, lose their purity (their "innocence") and their will-power (their "dream capacity") to oppose Adrian due to their hedonistic (all-too-human) sexual intimacy and a penchant for wishful thinking - what is ironically called "nostalgia", which is a symbol of their submission to Adrian's desire (in the scene, Silk Spectre uses a perfume manufactured by Adrian's company called "nostalgia": see chapter XII, p.22). So, the

only candidates left to vye for the title of the "king of kings" - hero of heroes - are Adrian, the megalomaniac kitsch artist, and Rorschach, the ugly, self-hating crime fighter. Of these two, Rorschach has to go. This means that Adrian wins the day, and consequently his version of *kitsch* becomes *myth* (i.e. is inscribed into history as such), and this myth itself becomes a sacred taboo of the New Age of Peace and Happiness, something that all superheroes must guard to death.

The fact that Adrian could pull it off in my opinion means that the "race" of superheroes is tainted forever, through their complicity and acquiescence, by the memory of this "original crime" against humanity (recalling Freud's theory of the origins of civilization in *Totem and Taboo*). Perhaps, however, if we see these superheroes as an aspect of humanity itself (many of them, after all, did come from humble backgrounds), we can see here a self-incrimination of humanity through myth (like the concept of Adam's original sin in Genesis). At any rate, we can now recapitulate and restate the theme of "the Hero's journey through death and rebirth" with another last look at some theory.

4. The Hero Myth and the Individual

In Adrian, we find all the attributes that are stereotypical to the traditional costumed hero: strong build (beauty), intelligence (truth), social status (will power) and a fetish for ugly capes (kitsch aesthetics). All of this is done ironically, to make fun of the superhero genre. But the deeper point is even more excruciating: it is precisely *because of* his ridiculous clothes and psychotic visionary tendencies that he is the perfect hero for the story. The world must die, because the world needs such a hero (or perhaps, the world needs such a hero because the world must die).

We must now understand what the connection is between the Psyche and the Society, and what part "the Hero myth" plays in all of this. Let us, then, take a closer look at a passage where Campbell analyses the role of the hero in the mythical rebirth of the society, and how we can apply this psycho-social model to an understanding of the eschatological elements found in *Watchmen*. In the following we have an apt description of the self-image of the masked superhero Adrian Veidt, the paradoxical hero-villain, who sees himself as the dreamer-rationalist (the master-visionary of the unconscious and the conscious realms of the psyche and society):

"Dream is the personalized myth, myth the depersonalized dream; both myth and dream are symbolic in the same general way of the dynamics of the psyche. But in the dream the forms are quirked by the peculiar troubles of the dreamer, whereas *in myth the problems and solutions shown*

are directly valid for all mankind. The hero, therefore, is the man or woman who has been able to battle past his personal and local historical limitations to the generally valid, normally human forms. Such a one's visions, ideas and inspirations come pristine from the primary springs of human life and thought. Hence they are eloquent, not of the present, disintegrating society and psyche, but of the unquenched *source through which society is reborn.* The hero has died as a modern man; but as eternal man - perfected, unspecific, universal man - he has been reborn" (pp.19-20, my italics).

This "present, disintegrating society" is clearly present in *Watchmen*, where the escalating war in Afghanistan and the threat of nuclear exchange have set the nuclear doomsday clock to five minutes till midnight. Literally, time is running out. In such a society, it is of paramount importance to locate the "source through which society is reborn", which is found in the dreams and plans of the heroic dreamer (Adrian Veidt, the mystic-shaman-charlatan), because he has "battle[d] past his personal and local historical limitations" (sense of being different as a child, superior to other kids) to reach solutions (plans for bringing about a global disaster) that are "directly valid for all mankind" (i.e. just the right medicine humanity needs to overcome its troubles). It is the hero (the superhero in this case) who becomes the "universal man" through whom the society can survive its impending apocalypse. Little does it matter that it was precisely *because* of him that the doomsday scenario materialized in the first place! After all, by bringing the eschatology to its close, he only fulfilled the promise of "the Second Coming" and "Paradise" that is supposed to come about at the end of times. Adrian delivered a complete and perfect solution to all of humankind's troubles – or so he thought. And he wasn't *all* wrong, was he? Although the future is left unclear, Adrian's solution was certainly, despite its cruelty and stupidity, the only conceivable harbinger of peace on earth, and even if the solution were only temporary – well, at least it was *a real solution.*

It should be noted that Jon (Doctor Manhattan) stood, for many decades, in the limelight as the USA's number one superhero - the miracle-maker (Jesus) who maintained *status quo* in domestic and foreign affairs, and good public relations for the press and the people. He was, after all, the personification of the nuclear program and the morally neutral superhero who could always be counted upon. He, in other words, was the maintainer (Vishnu). In this sense, Adrian completes the work that Jon started, by bringing it to its logical (and fantastically absurd) conclusion: global holocaust as a purifying media spectacle (Shiva's deadly move). After this sacrifice (or ritual murder), peace and goodwill may again prosper (re-birth: Brahma) - at least until the next time a sacrificial lamb or scapegoat or superhero is needed. Jon follows Adrian - as far as he does - because he knows the two of them are connected in this chain of events, ineluctably, as the two superhuman agencies in this absurd, cosmic drama.

They (the superheroes, demigods) are humanity's surplus, its spiritual waste.

Jon, though, was not fit to see the apocalypse to its end. This is why Adrian was needed to complete the ritual, to bring the game to a check mate. Jon, after all, was a determinist. He saw into the future, or thought he did. But if everything is pre-determined, nothing matters. On the contrary, Adrian's fanatical "faith" in his own dreams and plans reflected a belief in free will and the power of human beings to change things. The difference between their outlooks can be clearly discerned in their last dialogue (all from chapter XII, p.27), where Adrian explains his personal sense of responsibility for the world's suffering (mixed with barely conceived arrogance and pride over his achievement): "I know I've struggled across the backs of murdered innocents to save humanity... But someone had to take the weight of that awful, necessary crime. I'd hoped you'd understand, unlike Rorschach." To which Jon responds, coldly and rationally: "I understand, without condoning or condemning." Here, Adrian's approach is one of an idealist. He speaks of "that awful, necessary crime." Jon clearly agrees that it was *necessary* (because, for him, *everything* is necessary) but has no emotional attachment to the lives lost, so does not see it as *awful*. Nor does he approve of it. He simply sees. He also sees the futility of it, something that Adrian cannot comprehend: "Jon, wait, before you leave... I did the right thing, didn't I? It all worked out in the end." Jon: "'In the end?' / *Nothing* ends, Adrian, nothing *ever* ends."

Who was right, Adrian or Jon? Impossible to say!

The ritual is done. The time is up. But it starts again.

... Perhaps forever and ever.

5. Conclusion: The End of Power

As Campbell writes, "[o]nly birth can conquer death - the birth, not of the old thing again, but of something new. Within the soul, within the body social, there must be - if we are to experience long survival - a continuous "recurrence of birth" (*palingenesia*) to nullify the unremitting recurrences of death" (p.16). In other words, there has to be present a sense of never dying (a kind of intimation of immortality) in order for life to be liveable as a finite existence. Moreover, the cyclical, ritualistic nature of myth makes it possible to experience ever-renewed "recurrence of birth" in the form of this archetypal, eternal psychodrama where truth and fiction meet.

But what is this "awful, necessary crime" that Adrian felt he needed to bring about? It is nothing other than the dying-rebirth mythos, where the hero (the initiated human being) passes through a series of trials and tribulations before reaching an experience of personal death (to the old

self/society) and rebirth (to the new self/society). This mythological theme has been present in myths since time immemorial. The process of the perilous journey into then regions of the unknown is described archetypal terms. The heroes are the shamans who go into the labyrinth, to battle demons and to bring about rejuvenation. The apocalyptic calamity described in the *Watchmen* is nothing other than an allegory of a passage rite, a story of transformation and spiritual awakening. The initiation ceremony is, of course, painful. A huge sacrifice. A ritual murder. It is a necessary process: a death to the old dead flesh, and the birth of the new spirit-flesh. Certainly Adrian's "way" is only one possible solution to the superhero complex. Perhaps Rorschach's world-view, or Nite Owl's, contained the seeds for a potentially less painful rebirth of the world than Adrian's did. Perhaps, indeed, there was nothing inevitable about the way things turned out; perhaps the magnitude of the cataclysm was less the result of mankind's longing for a rebirth and more the result of a single madman's plans for world domination. But if transformation is really sought, pain of *some* kind is a necessary part of such a process, as man emerges *from* the abyss, *through* the abyss, to become the *super*-man that Nietzsche saw coming - even if this super-man is the brainchild of a tragicomic charlatan.

We have only scratched the surface of the mythical substratum of *Watchmen*, but by looking at the way mythic-heroic material is recycled and reinterpreted in the story may help us understand the archetypal elements present in all traditional forms of death-rebirth narrative. Our dreams, visions and psychological transformations are mapped out into the social landscape and laid out in front of us onto the narrative of the "hero's journey" where truth is fictively unmasked.

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