The Human Stain: Chaos and the Rage for Order in *Watchmen*

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■ In "Song of Myself," Walt Whitman writes, "Distant and dead resuscitate, / They show as the dial or move as the hands of me, I am the clock myself" (67). Here, as well as throughout *Leaves of Grass*, we find Whitman the transcendentalist equating himself with all of humanity, even the dead. Moreover, he posits his gestaltness as time itself, as the ultimate extension of humanity's ordering principle. Whitman, as us, is history; we, as Whitman, are part and particle of the universe, from its beginnings some fourteen billion years ago to now. We are ourselves but we are also Law. As with Emerson's notion of the "transparent eye-ball"—a philosophy that asks us "to look at the world with new eyes" (48)—Whitman's worldview puts humanity in the paradoxical position of both observer and observed, timekeeper and time, order and what is ordered: chaos. The graphic novel *Watchmen* by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons assesses humanity's status in much the same way.

A first encounter with *Watchmen*, originally published by DC Comics in single magazine format from 1986 to 1987, is a little like running into Whitman with a box of crayons and a wicked gleam in his eye. While *Watchmen* exists as older cousin to the recent metafictions of writers like Shelley Jackson and Mark Z. Danielewski, while it is clearly the grandchild of Postmodern masters such as Barth, Borges, Nabokov, Vonnegut and Woolf, it is also *great* grandchild

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of Hawthorne, Melville and Whitman. Though its authors hail from Britain, it is a quintessentially American book. Not surprisingly, the paradoxes do not end here. As with any significantly complex and recursive text, the minute one sets out to reduce the infinite to the simple, sublimity to character and plot point, the sand beneath begins to shift; iconic connections, metatextual crosscurrents, all the subtleties of theme and symbol begin to tumble and lose footing. Such distillation is precisely what a great work of art resists, and what a postmodern text like *Watchmen* (a text whose theme *is* that very refusal to believe in determinant meaning) resists most ferociously.

Darren Harris-Fain admiringly mentions *Watchmen*'s liberal use of flashbacks, multiple narratives and shifts in perspective, the very techniques which Peter S. Prescott and Ray Sawhill describe as "overreaching" (71). Prescott and Sawhill are, of course, terribly misguided. As is, for the most part, Fredric Paul Smoler when he says in his review in *The Nation*, "the narrative tone is melodramatic and hyperbolic, and the initial point of view seems blackly reactionary, but the melodrama seems a sensible concession to the tastes of the intended audience, while the retro politics may be an effective way of teaching people to read carefully" (3). What Smoler does not recognize is how those "retro" and "reactionary" politics are constantly reassessed, questioned, torn down and reconstructed by the symbols he doesn't deign to discuss. However, Smoler does go on to admit the "Ironies abound and are economically achieved through the juxtaposition of the 'documentary' material and the orthodox narrative; the pleasures of the text begin to depend on them" (3).

The thrust of the text revolves around four, main, "living" characters—Rorschach, Nite Owl, Silk Spectre II, and Dr. Manhattan—who are looking into the murder of the Comedian, one of only two superheroes, including Dr. Manhattan, who remain legally active in the world of *Watchmen*. The Comedian (basically Oliver North *cum* Charles Bronson sporting a leather death mask) has been killed, we find out later, by another retired and very wealthy hero, Ozymandias. The reason for the murder is convoluted, as is the rest of the plot, but in a nutshell, Ozymandias has planned to construct and teleport a fake extraterrestrial (one that will act as a kind of psychic bomb) to the center of New York City where its "death" will decimate half the population. The goal of all this "mad scientism" is not glory or wealth or revenge however—as would be the case with most of, say, Lex Luthor's plots—but rather to prevent global annihilation. Since this is the "real world" and the 1980s, Communist Russia and America are, as usual, on the brink of nuclear war. In this alternate universe, the threat of conflict is particularly acute due to the presence of Dr. Manhattan, a man who has tipped the balance of power in favor of the Americans. He is, after all, nuclear power incarnate, a kind of macro-atomic god who can alter reality

at will. Ozymandias believes that by providing the world with an alternative threat (i.e., aliens) he can save the many by sacrificing a "few."

When the Comedian finds out—regardless, hitherto, of his pronounced lack of conscience—even *he* can't let such a sacrifice happen. So Ozymandias kills him. It is against this backdrop that the story unfolds. For our purposes, the most important characters are Rorschach and Dr. Manhattan. Rorschach (a.k.a. Walter Joseph Kovacs) is literally a sociopath, a man who probably would have ended up a serial killer had he not discovered a mask behind which he can act in the name of the law. His idea of law, however, is not even so simply blurred as Batman's; it is, if you will, smeared and stained. One example comes midway through the book when, in a flashback, we see him discover a child killer. In utter silence, we watch Rorschach piece together the crime, mutilate the dogs the killer has used to dispose of the body, apprehend the criminal himself, handcuff him to a stove, hand him a hacksaw, and set fire to the shed where the man is chained. He leaves the man a choice: cut off his hand and escape, or die (VI.18-25). In this way, Rorschach defends his vision of Law. What we see as shady at best, he sees as clear-sightedness.

Dr. Manhattan (a.k.a. Jon Osterman), on the other hand, breaks all the other laws, those of the universe. He sees space-time synchronically, across the layers of events, all things and places simultaneously. And he is able to do pretty much anything he wills with matter. Yet, even with all this power, he at first chooses only to act according to one government's whims and, later, only according to his own. In the end, he walks away from any singular, human responsibility and wanders off to create an entirely new reality. Where Rorschach acts out of a completely introverted vision of Law (seeing little but himself, his own definitions, and acting on them), Dr. Manhattan does the same thing, but for a different reason. Because he cannot see *a* self, because he is all selves and all truths, all possibility and all reason, he too acts on what must be, by definition, a singular (if infinite) vision of right and wrong. For the former, Law is definable, for the latter, infinitely recursive and indeterminate. Both, effectively, arrive at the same answer to the problem posed by Ozymandias's plan to save the world through a dangerous lie. Both choose to let the lie stand. Rorschach, because he can't allow the lie and live, chooses death. Dr. Manhattan, because it has always been a lie *and* never was, because all truths are equal, leaves this universe for another of his own making.

Rorschach and Dr. Manhattan represent the extremes to which humanity goes to understand and organize the world. Both exist outside of the Law, but act in its name. Both break the law in order to keep it. Rorschach represents those who would see no gradations of good and evil; actions are either damning or redemptive, no middle ground. Consequently, Rorschach himself cannot adapt

and, like Ahab, falls into final ruin when he realizes his uncompromising vision must lead to global annihilation. Dr. Manhattan represents those who would see all sides at once, the whole as well as the parts, what T.S. Eliot saw as "Time present and time past. . . present in time future" and "time future contained in time past" (117). Thus Dr. Manhattan, though he does act and react early on in the story, finds, at the end, that he cannot commit; like Hamlet, he is trapped in a hermeneutic circle that ultimately prevents him from taking a side.

Looking at the issue of *scientific* law, Brent Fishbaugh describes Dr. Manhattan as a man "who has become a scientist to the extent of losing his humanity, his appreciation for the beauty of science" (10). "Rorschach," Fishbaugh says, "is all passion and no reason while Jon [Dr. Manhattan] is the exact opposite" (10). However, the matter is a bit more complex than Fishbaugh suggests. Both characters represent the law as well as its lack, the desire for order as well as a willingness to go beyond. Seen together, they both become signifiers of the same problem: interpretation. How do we know what is right and wrong? How do we know what *the* answer is? Should we laugh or cry, now that the Comedian is dead? Can we be, *should* we be, saved? Is there such a thing as a Transcendental Signified? Thus, the unfolding of their respective stories is a gradual illumination of what lies under the hood, what makes the world tick, what is right or wrong about requiring what Frost called a "design of darkness to appall" (396).

In *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault writes, "it is in vain that we attempt to show, by the use of images, metaphors, or similes, what we are saying; the space where they achieve their splendour is not that [space] deployed by our eyes" (9). Here, Foucault is suggesting something about the ultimate failure of signs, of representation, of the search for transcendental signifiers. Such a discussion, of course, leads inexorably toward postmodernism and the realm of phenomenology where meaning and being are so inextricably interwoven that one must concede, at the extreme, no meaning at all. However, Ellen Dissanayake, a lecturer at the New School for Social Research in New York City, argues, "As *Homo aestheticus*, we really require beauty and meaning—those answers to human questions and desires that are to be found in (what should be evident in the name we give them) 'the humanities'" (3). Regardless, then, of whether final, determinable meaning can be found in human constructs, Dissanayake, along with innumerable others, argues that "art is intrinsic to our specieshood" (225). On this same topic, Alan Moore himself says, "I would like to think that this disintegration of coherence that seems to be going on throughout our culture is part of some step towards some new kind of reintegration. I'd like to think that, but I'd have to wait before I gave any conclusive feelings upon that. A lot of the time it does look like a complete breakdown to

shambling idiocy" ("Mainstream" 94).

The search for order is doomed to failure. The search for order is intrinsic to our being. These two notions—notions which, if both true, make the human race by definition neurotic (if not schizophrenic)—are played out with exceeding visual and verbal grace as well as spiraling complexity in Moore and Gibbons's novel. Making use of Rorschach and Dr. Manhattan—two men symbolizing two ways of seeing, two men for two eyes—*Watchmen* explores the full implications of these apparently conflicting notions and the human masochism they imply. However, beyond the characters, beyond the metafictional techniques (perhaps running parallel to, or becoming a parallax for, both) the text also adopts a variegated complex of visual symbols to address the notion that to be human is to be inherently visually impaired. We see as if through a glass darkly, yes, but that glass through which we look is the human desire for order. That desire is in our blood, it *is* our blood, and our blood cannot help us see.

This blood (Rorschach's and Dr. Manhattan's blood, the Comedian's, New York City's, humanity's blood), this desire to see which breeds blindness, is symbolized in a stain, one that first appears on a smiley face button in *Watchmen*'s beginning panels and becomes a running motif throughout the twelve-part tale. Here, the Comedian has just been killed, and his logo, a smiley face, lies blood-spattered in a gutter beneath the window out of which he was pushed (I.overleaf-4). A streak of blood crosses the right eye of the face, angling from upper left to lower right. We see this image or its variants (signs and portents) more than fifty more times in the book. Taken together, the first stain and its permutations underscore a postmodern theme that makes comedy into tragedy and humanity into has-been heroes without costumes, without cause, without any purpose but perhaps one: love. Love one another, that may be all we can do, even if, as Rorschach writes in his journal, it doesn't exist: "American love," he says, "like Coke in green glass bottles. . . .They don't make it anymore" (II.25).

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Let us begin with the eyes, since this is after all a book whose theme suggests something about how we see. Many of the images of (at least symbolically) occluded eyes are thematically insignificant alone, but from the scar running through the right eye of a punk biker at Happy Harry's Bar and Grill in Chapter I (I.14) to what may indeed be a similar scar crossing the same eye of the child killer mentioned earlier (VI.23), from Kovacs's (Rorschach's) eye bruise and band-aid seen throughout Chapter VI to his own smeared tears

seen in flashback (VI.4), from eyes reflected in a bottle of Nostalgia perfume (IX.24) to a badly weathered scarecrow (X.23) to a jack-o-lantern stained by candle wax (VIII.12), we are bombarded with the symbolic loss of vision, with the message that our sight is inherently impaired.

The transformation of the syntagm we first saw in the first panel of the book takes place over a trajectory that encompasses the entire story. We see Silk Spectre's smeared makeup in Chapter III (8) and hair across one of her eyes in Chapter IX (21), a variation repeated several more times, but notably with a pirate (V.12) and with Hollis Mason, the original Nite Owl, just before he is killed, his sight occluded forever (VIII.28). We are reminded of the trope when Kovacs burns a fellow prisoner with hot oil to the face (VI.12), when a prison bar crosses the left eye of another of Kovacs's enemies (VIII.15) just prior to having his throat cut, again when, as a child, Kovacs puts out a cigarette in a bully's right eye (VI.7), and yet again when we see Nite Owl's owl ship half-submerged in the river, a broken pier piling crossing its right "eye" (X.4). But while these examples provide a context, a new syntagmatic structure of their own in which the other examples move, the overall paradigmatic significance can be most clearly seen in a sequence of variations involving the Comedian (a.k.a. Edward Morgan Blake).

In the early 40s, the Comedian was a member of a superhero group called the Minutemen. The flashback sequence that shows why Blake was expelled from the group, a scene where he attempts to rape the original Silk Spectre (Sally Jupiter, nee Juspeczyk), begins with Jupiter changing out of her costume in front of a large convex mirror ostensibly taken from the criminal Moloch and labeled as such (II.5). Most interesting here is that as the Spectre stands in front of the mirror, her hazy reflection in it recreates the smiley face eye-stain in a fashion we will see repeated several times. This human specter which occludes the eye clearly images our theme and is very quickly built upon in the following panels. When the Comedian tries to rape her, the Silk Spectre scratches his face, just below the mask covering his right eye (II.6). Later in this same chapter, we see the Comedian shirking his obligation to a Vietnamese woman who is pregnant with his child; when she confronts him, he denies her and she cuts his face (same eye) with a broken bottle (II.14). Only a few pages later, during a flashback of street riots back in the States, we see the later incarnation of his Comedian costume fully for the first time. Here, Blake stands on the front of the second Nite Owl's Owl ship, covering the left "eye" of the ship in much the same way as Silk Spectre crossed the lens of Moloch's giant mirror (II.16). His leather mask, designed like some bondage loving scarecrow's, includes outlines around both eyes, but the left is crossed by a vertical oblong, again imaging both the smiley face and his own scars (if

crossing a different eye) (II.17).

The scars themselves we don't see fully until later in this same chapter when Moloch (a now retired villain) recounts a late-night visit Blake paid him shortly before his death. As the Comedian comes into the light, grabbing hold of Moloch's night clothes in a fashion similar to how Hooded Justice grappled with him years before while stopping his intended rape of Silk Spectre, his scars become painfully visible (II.23). They have torn the right side of his face deeply, leaving a huge depression in his jaw, a partially missing lip, and a keloid marking that stretches from the corner of his right eye clear down to his mouth. We see them again in Chapter IX when Silk Spectre II (Laurie Juspeczyk, Sally Jupiter's daughter) confronts Blake about the attempted rape of her mother. These scars, perhaps emphasized by his sexist and racist comments during this particular party, make his whole face appear skull-like when he turns. Just after Blake, rather circumspectly, reveals to Laurie that he is her father (a recognition that she will not fully digest and understand until much later), she disgustedly tosses her drink in his face, dousing the bottle scars that cover her mother's nail scars (IX.20-21). Stains on top of stains on top of stains.

The Comedian represents *Watchmen*'s first death. He also represents the search for meaning that both Rorschach and Dr. Manhattan (and others) will later have to face. Though he may be irredeemable in many ways—rapist, murderer, terrorist, vigilante, king-maker—he is, after all, the first of *Watchmen*'s costumed heroes to discover the truth about Ozymandias's plans, the first to find them repugnant, and the first to die in order to bring them to light. If it weren't for his sacrifice, the death of comedy if you will, Ozymandias's engineered tragedy would not have come to Rorschach's attention. Sally Jupiter herself, Blake's intended rape victim, says of him after the funeral, "Poor Eddie." When her daughter questions how her mother could possibly pity such a man, Sally says, "Laurie, you're young, you don't know. Things change. What happened, happened forty years ago. . ." and later, "Listen, gettin' old, you get a different perspective. The big stuff looks smaller somehow." Finally, she says, "Laurie, I'm 65. Every day the future looks a little bit darker. But the past, even the grimy parts of it. . . well, it just keeps on getting brighter all the time" (II.1-4).

Clearly, Sally has let go of seeing Blake as would-be-rapist only. In fact later, after the attack, he became her lover and the father of Laurie. Because of this fact, Laurie herself will have to come to terms with the complexity of seeing, of ordering her perceptions. How can she hate her father, particularly when the encounter that led to her existence appears to have been consensual? How can she still love her mother when she loved and now pities the man who would have raped her? How can we, the readers of *Watchmen*, watch such a

man and not despise him? How do we not simply laugh at his death? If such a man can be redeemed, if, by the end of the novel, we find his story truly tragic, then what does our sight mean? Perhaps it, like the Comedian's symbol itself, is always already tainted. *Watchmen* tells us that one way of seeing an event is rare enough, but more, time can alter the valence of any perceived meaning for any given event. One day, rapist. Another, lover and father. Yet another, pitiable memory.

In *Watchmen*, in Hollis Mason's autobiographical book within a book, *Under the Hood*, he writes about an old friend who loved practical jokes and erotic novelty items. This friend, Moe Vernon, found out one day that his wife had been cheating on him. He discovered this news while in the midst of a practical joke, while wearing, in fact, a set of false breasts. Mason says of Moe, "He stood there. . . the tears rolling down over his multiple chins to soak into the pink foam rubber of his bosom, making tiny sounds in his chest and throat. . . . And everybody started laughing." Mason, the original Nite Owl, then goes on to write,

> Maybe it's safe to tell you why I'm crazier than Moe Vernon ever was. I didn't have a drawer full of erotic novelties, but I guess I had my own individual quirks. And although I've never worn a set of false bosoms in my life, I've stood there dressed in something just as strange, with tears in my eyes while people died laughing. (I.29-30)

Whether the eye's tears or the skin's *tears*, real eyes or eye-like simulacrum, the image of *ocula obscura* repeats in more ways than can be counted here. From Laurie's eyes reflected in her coffee and crossed by reflective ripples (III.10) to Nite Owl's steam-stained right eyeglass lens (VII.12) to a TV screen, itself a type of lens, reflected in those same Owl-eye lenses (VII.15), we see our sight affronted and attenuated, converted and conditioned both by *what* and *how* we see. Finally, perhaps the most evocative sequence of eye occlusion symbols occurs in Chapter VII when Laurie, having recently left Dr. Manhattan, stays over at Nite Owl's house. In this sequence, she has just discovered Nite Owl's basement and is poking around all the secret contraptions that he has kept (ala Batman) even after being forced into retirement by the Keene Act which banned all costumed heroes but two.

The first image we see is so close up as to be abstract. Only as we pull away are we able to recognize the left lens of Night Owl's distinctive goggles hanging from the neck of his mothballed suit, the suit itself hanging in a closet in front of his famous Owl Ship, now nearly derelict. All is covered in dust, abandoned. Standing between this suit and ship, however, is Laurie, her finger smudged with the dust of having just rubbed one goggle lens. The lens, stained

everywhere now *except* for where her finger has passed over it, reflects the "eyes" of the Owl Ship. The reverse stain on one "eye," then, apparently occludes the reflection of another, reversed, "eye." Left eye watches right eye, removal of stain *becomes* stain, and then, to further complicate an already rich matrix of inter-reflecting symbols, Nite Owl joins Laurie, and both are now reflected *inside* the reverse stain on the goggles, apparently existing, full-body, within the stain showing across the Owl Ship's right "eye" or window (VII. overleaf-4). Add to this matrix Laurie's beauty mark, just below her right eye, and the eventual entry of the two into the ship itself where they take up residence behind the ship's right window, and we have the two humans (who are arguably more than human) reflected *behind* an eye that isn't an eye *in* an eye that also isn't an eye and crossed by a stain that, well, isn't a stain (VII.6-7). Nite Owl's own posture behind the window conforms to this reverse stain; thus he, and by extension the humanity he protects and hides, *becomes* the stain.

Ultimately, this whole chapter is about what we hide and what we reveal. It lets us into the heads of two rather broken individuals, Laurie and Daniel Dreiberg (a.k.a. Nite Owl), and paints a heartbreaking and touching portrait of what it means to be both hero and human being. The two are stumbling through life, making few if any real human connections, even though they once chose to save humanity. They have so descended into their alternate identities that they cannot remember who they are without the costume, without the cape. In fact, in order to finally consummate the love that has been growing between the two (which may be little more than pity, at least at the outset), they have to put on their costumes—have to go out, save others, before they can go in, save themselves; have to be heroes again before they can be human, again. They put on their costumes so that they can, ultimately, take them off, together (VII.27). This chapter ends with our only partially costumed crusaders embracing, with Laurie's elbow accidentally pressing the flamethrower button, with fire erupting from the eye of the owl ship as it hovers over the city. Tears, tears, scars, dust, fire, blood, flesh, even owls. . . . We see what is before us, but, as the mysterious message from the stars says in *Twin Peaks*: "The owls may not be what they seem." Again, this complex and its final revelation of humanity-as-stain is repeated many times later, but as with the Comedian, as with Rorschach and Dr. Manhattan, the notion of seeing through a glass darkly, of being unable to see what is right before us, of revelation found only after re-veiling, is indeed revealing.

We are the shadows. We are the stains. *We* are what gets in the way of seeing. We are what we see. Where Jon comes to find the sublime in the abyss, Rorschach finds only darkness. Of course the other characters in *Watchmen* are important, but it is these two apparently contradictory perspectives that provide

the phenomenological underpinning of the novel. It is all too easy to forget this now, what with the explosion at Chernobyl and the subsequent fall of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union, but *Watchmen* is set in a time and place perceived then as the End of Days. For some time during the course of the book, both Manhattan and Kovacs see this possible future coming the same way. And Ozymandias's ostensible answer to the End? This, they also see the same way until Jon makes the human connection that Rorschach cannot. To this end, the book is full of images of shadows, stains to be interpreted like the patterns on Rorschach's mask. Is the abyss empty or full? Is the stain a beautiful butterfly or a dead dog with its head split open? Is the future full of promise, or have we used up our lease on this planet? Is there any more American love?

The dog just mentioned we see in chapter VI, the "Abyss" chapter. Rorschach (really Kovacs, now that he has been captured and "outed") is asked by Dr. Long to interpret some literal Rorschach blots (VI.1, 17). What he sees is the skull of the dog he killed the night he "became" Rorschach. What he says to Long is, "A pretty butterfly." This same image of a face stained with blood is reminiscent of the Comedian's visage when he confronts Moloch or when, in "Fearful Symmetry," Rorschach finds the latter with a bullet in his brain (V.24). It is the same visage we see when Ozymandias grabs the Comedian just before he kills him (I.3), and also when he feeds his fake assassin the assassin's own poison capsule (V.16). It is effectively the same stained face we see in Kovacs's memory of having fruit smashed in his face as a child, the day he remembers being called a "whoreson," being taunted about his mother's indiscretions, and getting even by putting out a cigarette in one of his tormentors' eyes (the right one).

Of course the most obvious stains are ones that make up Rorschach's mask (VI.10, etc.) and the "real" inkblots (VI.overleaf, etc.); the idea of interpretive malleability or infinite indeterminacy are never far from the fold here. But perhaps the most interesting stains or blots are not about blood or ink. Chapter six reveals one of the roots of Rorschach's pathology: seeing his mother and one of her cheap Johns having sex and casting a combined human shadow on the wall (VI.3). The first thought of the young Kovacs is that the man is hurting his mother. When he walks in on them to really see what's going on, she loses her "earnings" for that night and takes it out on her confused son. The next shadow we witness is the one that more clearly and indelibly stains the young, budding sociopath's psychology. After saying, "You know what you just cost me, you ugly little bastard? I shoulda listened to everybody else! I shoulda had the abortion," we watch Kovacs's mother hurting him, but only in shadow, very nearly the same shadow as what drew him to the room in the first place (VI.4), save now the hurt is real, both physically and mentally. Again, when

we see Kovacs/Rorschach extrapolate this latter shadow from the ink blot Dr. Long shows him, he simply says he sees "Some nice flowers" (5).

We will witness this same image of the human shadow, or shadow human, many times throughout the novel, even in the final chapter, just before his suicide-by-Dr.-Manhattan, when Kovacs stumbles across Dan and Laurie comforting each other after they've discovered Ozymandias's awful truth (XII.22). The very next panel shows Rorschach's mask, this time the ink blot mirroring both what he's just seen and what we know he saw as a child (23). However, for *this* Kovacs, *this* Rorschach, the blot is just that, a blot, for he can no more make connection with another human being, now, than he could understand, then, what was likely at the root of his mother's rage: shame. Kovacs has no shame, only anger, and without shame, no pity. Without pity, no redemption. Thus, only one page later, unmasked and angry, knowing now that he cannot lie about what he knows, but also, somehow, that he cannot let the world die just to serve his sense of propriety—his face contorted into the face of the dog he killed, the face of Moloch, the face of the Comedian, of the boy he was when he first let shame go and converted it to rage—Kovacs begs for Jon to disintegrate him (24).

Other images of shadow humans, human stains, can be seen in the moment when Jon is himself disintegrated by light, by the experiment to remove the intrinsic field from concrete block 15 (IV.8), in the skeletal dream Dan has of himself and Laurie stripped to bone by an atomic blast (VII.16-17), in the Hiroshima shadows some street artist has painted on the walls of alleys of this world (V.11, 18), in the second time Jon is disintegrated, this time by Ozymandias (XII.14), and, finally, in the last scene of the book's ubiquitous news vendor and the boy who has been reading *Tales of the Black Freighter*. Here, the two otherwise minor characters are the first we see die at ground zero, the place where Ozymandias's nefarious, world-saving enterprise, erupts. Here, both the boy and the vendor hold each other, like Rorschach's mother and her lover, like Dan and Laurie, like the shadows (real and imagined) of Hiroshima, and wink out into blankness—the last image, one of light overwhelming darkness, of the darkness becoming a solid, singular stain, the exact same shape of the blood stain crossing the eye of the Comedian's incongruous costume flair (XI.28).

This shape and the stain it implies is not just a repetition of the Chapter I overleaf. It also repeats the first page of chapter XI itself, the empty space left by condensation on the surface of Ozymandias's Xanadu, his pleasure dome (echoing Jon's) full of tropical wonders and genetic creations, his Antarctic retreat where the final confrontation takes place (XI.overleaf, 1). Again, like the Owl goggles earlier, this stain is actually absence, and behind it we see

flowers, green vine, a butterfly. As counterpoint to the final, same shape at the end of this chapter, we must ask ourselves, is the stain empty or full? Is it even a stain at all? Is it the end or beginning? And, given that both versions are effectively made of life, is it other, or is it us? Considering the fact that the final chapter begins with the clock at Madison Square Garden (XII.overleaf-3), at the scene of the murder of half of New York's City's citizenry, stopped at the stroke of midnight, November second, All Souls Day, near signs reading *Pale Horse*, *Krystalnacht*, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, Utopia, Promethean Cab Co.: Bringing Light to the World. . . . Considering the fact that the clock is covered in the kind of blood that would, of course, *begin* with a similar stain to what we've seen before, the idea that such a sign could ever mean life is perhaps a strain. But remember that Adrien Veidt's plan is to bring life out of death, and remember too that all we have seen up to this point suggests that the choice of interpretation is up to the one who reads the blots. The doctor may have a preconceived notion of what we will say, of what that which we *do* say means, but this does not make the blot any less our own making.

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In May of 2002, Luke Helder was arrested for "placing pipe bombs in mailboxes to create a 'smiley face' across America" (Barton 1A). An article by a writer from the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* claims, "The first 16 bombs were arranged in two circles, one in Illinois and Iowa and the other in Nebraska. On a map, the circles could resemble the eyes of the popular 1970s happiness symbol. The final two bombs, found in Colorado and Texas, form an arc that could be the beginning of a smile" (1A). Upon his arrest, Helder was described as anything but distraught: "His demeanor was very jovial. He didn't seem to be taking anything seriously at the time. . . . It was almost as if we were old friends and we'd thrown a surprise party for him" (1A, 5A). The great wonder of being mired in postmodern thought is that everything is about perception and interpretation. The great terror of being part of the postmodern era is that everything is about perception and interpretation. One man's smiley face is another's lost arm, lost living, lost hope. Thus we arrive at the central question of the *Watchmen*. Yes, the novel asks what is a hero, and even what is a comic book, but it also asks, what do we know and how do we know it? It is, as are most postmodern texts, a book about its own textuality. How can we know what we think we know, when what we know is predicated on symbols that cannot be "known"? And if we can know nothing, if nothing is true, isn't everything? Is Ozymandias sane, more sane than those who have attempted to stop him? He is, after all, attempting to sacrifice millions for billions. Is

Rorschach the least fragrant sociopath in the bunch? Is the Comedian really a laugh riot, or should we weep over his demise?

Watchmen asks *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes* (Who watches the watchmen?). But it could just as easily ask what *is* watching, can we really watch anything, is there anything *to* watch? Or, when we watch, are we really only watching ourselves? As we have seen, the stained smiley face symbol shows up, in pieces, many times in the book, but perhaps the most notable incarnations appear whole, in toto, the entire set of syntagms together in one re-imagining of the full syntagmatic structure. The first of these significant reimaginings of the whole face appears on the first page of "Fearful Symmetry." Each of the eight syntagms—a circle, two eyes (one occluded), a smiling mouth, two colors (yellow and black), and a stain particular in both its shape and color—is present here, but disassociated from the others (V.overleaf). Ultimately, this particular image is the upside down reflection of a sign for a liquor store called The Rumrunner, situated just next to the villain Moloch's skid row apartment. The logo for the store, a double RR with the first R reversed, is situated just above crossed bones, re-creating an image of the Jolly Roger so prominently figured in the Black Freighter tales, as well as Rorschach's stylized, signed initials. Rain drops strike the pool of brackish rain water, scarlet neon from the red-light district turn the water to blood, ripples create circles that both enclose and occlude the "eyes" of the double R (our abstract skull), but we do not really *see* a smiley face. What we see are portents and signs of the sign, portents that connect the smile we do not see to a death that is only implied.

Much less abstract, if paradoxically more obscure, the smiley face appears in full as the sun seen through a misted window in the chapter "A Brother to Dragons," the stain made once again by absence rather than presence, and the smile made by a scud of clouds (VII.18), and again toward the end of this same chapter as the Owl Ship in relief against the full moon, another scud of clouds forming the smile, but this time the stain created by smoke from a nearby chimney (VII.28). This chapter, saying what it does about two of our main characters, is aptly bookended by these images. We make our faces, we take them off, we put them back on. We, like Job, are brothers to dragons and companions to owls (Job 30.29), we, also like Job, must decide how to interpret our seeming fate, and we must recognize, as the companion essay to this chapter intimates, owls sit at the right hand of Pallas Athena, goddess of the mind. We must remember where she sprang from. . . the brow of Jupiter (Sally or otherwise) whose planetary namesake sports the solar system's largest "eye." Like the narrator of "The Raven," we must decide whether the bird should overshadow our reason, take up dominion over Pallas (the palace) and be seen as a harbinger of death (psychopomp), or whether we should, as Yeats

implies about Leda, "put on its knowledge with its power" (212) even as it is ravishing us.

The final four incarnations of the complete smiley face are even more interesting. We should thus analyze them one at a time. By the end of Chapter IX, the crystal palace Jon has made of Martian sand comes crashing down around him and Laurie. In the midst of this shattering existential exchange, the point of view begins to pull back and back from the devastated construction, and we see the two one-time lovers emerge into the Martian landscape, which, here, as it turns out is in the middle of a crater. The crater is dotted with boulders, two of them very large, and a curving ridge. As we continue to pull out from the scene, continuing until we can see Mars' terminator, it becomes clear that the natural Martian landscape, this crater and its primary landmarks, form the simulacra of a smiley face. More, the broken palace (pink due to its building blocks) has fallen partially across one of the two boulders, forming a reddish stain across the left "eye" of the crater, itself tinged yellow-orange due to the sun hitting the Martian sand in just the right way (IX.27).

As it turns out, this crater actually exists on Mars, and it does indeed look strangely like a smiley face, though the two "eyes" are not boulders but what appear to be a mound and a smaller impact crater within the first. According to Malin Space Science Systems, "There are a number of Viking Orbiter images of Mars that, from time to time, have been invoked as examples of landforms that look like familiar objects. One of the better examples is the crater Galle located on the eastern margin of the large basin Argyre. The "face: was first noticed in synoptic observations taken early in the Viking Orbiter 1 mission" ("Happy"). Moore and Gibbons use this spontaneous Martian landform to, again, suggest something about the nature of seeing. During this long "reveal," Jon and Laurie are discussing "Thermodynamic miracles, events with odds against so astronomical they're effectively impossible." They are discussing whether or not life is worth living, whether they should stay together or whether she should go with Nite Owl, the man she may have fallen in love with, and, finally, they are discussing Laurie's memory of her biological father (the Comedian) and how she should "see" him. The fact that this graphic simulacra of a geological simulacra images a smiley face with an occluded eye only serves to reinforce the notion that we cannot be sure what we see is "true." Further, the fact that we only see this real-life crater as smiley face because we are hungry for order, awash in the desire to find ourselves (or evidence of others like ourselves) among the stars, the fact that we look for order in the middle of chaos because we do not want to be alone, is itself a part of the same thematic matrix. We anthropomorphize more than just craters in this life. We look for faces in stucco ceilings, we find Jesus in refrigerator mold, Mary in

pieces of toast, Gods in random patterns of suns. We look for answers to who killed the Comedian. We look for options other than nuclear annihilation. We look for love among the ruins.

The fear of mutually assured destruction (M.A.D.) permeates *Watchmen* just as it permeated the 80s culture from which it arises. In the novel, America and Russia are on the brink of war, Nixon is as paranoid as ever (perhaps more so, given that he's had extra terms to continue as president), and signs of the end are everywhere. Chapter X, "Two Riders Were Approaching," begins with a close-up of a radar screen (X.overleaf). At first glance, two tracking lights moving across the face of this screen appear to be incoming missiles penetrating American airspace. However, the tracers are merely indicators of Air Force One and Air Force Two arriving at SAC Norad since tensions between the two superpowers have escalated. Eventually, Nixon disembarks and sequesters himself in the underground facility to sit and wait out any potential hostilities. Nevertheless, to return to the radar screen, when we first encounter it, we assume the worst. The bombs are flying, the Horsemen are coming, the world is going to end. Yet the image presents us with a circle (the screen itself), two eyes (the two tracking planes), and a smile (reflection of light on the glass curving just below the tracers).

Here, the smiley face subverts our expectations. While our pre-critical response should be one of terror and perhaps despair, the accompanying simulacra, the smiley face that appears with a second glance at the radar screen, acts on us in exactly the opposite fashion from the first appearance of this artifact of 70s kitsch. In its first incarnation, the smiley face sports blood and is attached, literally, to death. Here, apparent oncoming death is reimagined as "happy thoughts." Such reconfiguration, such reinterpretation of the standing symbols/facts, is precisely what Ozymandias is after. He intends to destroy life to save it, to take away freedom in order to provide it, to become as God in order to able to live as a man. It is left up to Dr. Manhattan and Rorschach to interpret his actions. Dreiberg and Laurie, too, will have to decide what to do with this information once Ozymandias's plot is uncovered, but by this point in the story they are too much in love to do anything but worry about interpreting each other. No, it is Jon and Kovacs who will have to decide if the smile is a smile, or if the world should be turned upside down.

Of the two, Rorschach has the harder choice to make. By the end of the novel, once all is revealed—Ozymandias's plot, his attempt to save the world by killing three million innocents—Rorschach cannot *not* reveal the criminal mastermind behind the largest mass murder in history. Regardless of what that slaughter may mean for the history of history, how it may indeed bring America and Russia together to face a common (if fictional) enemy, Rorschach cannot

allow such vast mendacity (and in his mind, hypocrisy) to stand. In the final pages of *Watchmen*, just as Rorschach appears to be leaving Ozymandias's Antarctic retreat, Dr. Manhattan confronts his comrade in arms and asks:

> Manhattan: Where are you going?
>
> Rorschach: Back to owlship. Back to America. Evil must be punished. People must be told.
>
> Manhattan: Rorschach. . . you know I can't let you do that.
>
> Rorschach: Huhhh. Of course. Must protect Veidt's new Utopia. One more body amongst foundations makes little difference. Well? What are you waiting for? Do it. . . . DO IT! (XII.23-24)

And here, Jon blasts Kovacs's atoms into nothingness. All that is left is a smoking stain on the snow outside Veidt's pleasure dome. The stain that was Rorschach is the exact same stain we've seen before, but, more than this, the smoke rising from the place where our objectivist has stood crosses the circular opening into the dome. Behind the smoke on the left, an icicle descends from the arch; behind the smoke on the right, the steering column of one of Nite Owl's hoverbikes rises. In the shadow of the light streaming from the dome, these two verticals become black eyes hovering in the face of a circle of yellow light. The interior of the cylindrical opening shines, a wavering pattern of reflection becoming the smile. The red-tinged smoke coming from one stain becomes yet another stain as it crosses the eye of ice (XII.24).

This particularly convoluted re-imaging of the smiley face follows Rorschach's fatal choice to maintain the integrity of his vision. Rorschach cannot see grey, therefore we see red. It precedes Jon's choice to leave this universe and make a new one. Jon can see nothing but possibility, therefore he decides to create even more. What *are* our choices? How do we see? Edmund Husserl, founder of phenomenology, says this of human beings:

> . . . I understand and accept each of them as an Ego-subject just as I myself am one, and as related to his natural surrounding world. But I do this in such a way that I take their surrounding world and mine Objectively as one and the same world of which we all are conscious, only in different modes. Each has his place from which he sees the physical things present; and, accordingly, each has different physical-thing appearances. Also, for each the fields of actual perception, actual memory, etc., are different. . . . (55-56)

Basically, according to James M. Edie, Husserl posited that "a perceptual object is nothing other than the system of all of its possible presentations. . . " (115). Edie goes on to say,

> a perceptual object is both given and not given in the same perceptual presentation. It is given as having many aspects that are not now presented but which *could* be. And if other persons are present a given perceptual object is even presented as being *de facto* perceived from other viewpoints which I *could* occupy in principle but do not now and may never occupy.
>
> This law of the infinity of the perceptual object pertains not only to the *x* limit-point, transcendent to the perceiver, but is true of the perceiver himself. (116)

Relating this philosophical stance to *Watchmen*, both Rorschach and Dr. Manhattan "see" the same perceptual object, Ozymandias's act. Both recognize the two ways of interpreting it, understanding its presentation; it is both horrifying and hopeful. But while Manhattan understands this polarity of possible meanings as the-way-things-are, as ultimately perfection itself, Rorschach wants to flee from said indeterminacy.

In this scene outside the Pleasure Dome, a scene with two (if only barely) human watchers, the watchers themselves also become the subject of watching, of interpretation. Manhattan, the ostensible phenomenologist, reverts to objectivism when he destroys Rorschach, yet his very action supports multiplicity by enforcing the singularity of it. Rorschach *becomes* purely subjective (a stain to be interpreted) when he is destroyed, his lack of multiple meanings (his death) now feeding more interpretive possibility than his life would have. Up to this point, both have always already been stains, Rorschach with his Rorschach mask, Manhattan with his lack of clearly defined human features: one black (now red) dot, one pale blue one. These two stains interpret each other both into *and out of* existence, even as they interpret another who does not stand here with them.

In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger writes, "Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak. But there is also another sense in which seeing comes before words. It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it" (7). Jon and Kovacs are surrounded by a world that always already exists, they stand beside a mock world that both does and doesn't, and they are fighting over a new world order that itself only questionably exists (now that Ozymandias's plan has brought peace). They, like we, struggle to define what they should say about these various worlds, based on an interpretation informed by the worlds in which they *may only believe*

they have lived and (perhaps) still do. Sean Carney writes, "For Rorschach, a world where meaning is only imposed by humans is a world without inherent meaning, while Moore's argument is that it is a fallacy to separate meaning from the world in the first place: the world is *made* by the discovery of meaning in it" (14). Should Jon and Kovacs frown or smile? What does the blot on this world mean? What is the Word? Is it the beginning or the end? Behind them, the smile smiles on, even though it, too, does not exist.

But this is not the last, full syntagmatic structure we see. The smiley face appears one final time after Rorschach's decision leaves the other masked super powers, as well as the *world's* super powers, to fend for themselves. Kovacs may have abandoned this world (like Jon, if by different means), however, he has left one thing behind: his journal. Just before he and Dreiberg had left for Antarctica, he dropped his journal in the mail, only to be received by the tabloid paper *The New Frontiersman* and subsequently shunted to their Crank File, unread. In the final panels of *Watchmen*, the assistant to *The New Frontiersman*'s editor is left with his own choice. The editor wants filler for the next issue since "nobody's allowed to say bad things about our good ol' buddies the Russians anymore" (XII.32). Seymour, the none-too-bright assistant, is eating a hamburger as he makes his decision. Standing over the Crank File, needing to find some story to run, he is also wearing a smiley face t-shirt. Shortly before he reaches out to pick something from the file (perhaps Rorschach's journal), ketchup spills from the burger and occludes his t-shirt's right eye (XII.32). We never find out what Seymour's choice is; we are not told if Seymour does indeed "see more," but are left with one final thought, a quote from John Cale: "It would be a stronger world, a stronger loving world, to die in" (XII.32).

■ ■ ■

Alan Moore has said

> . . . with *Watchmen*, what we tried to do was give it a truly kind of crystalline structure, where it's like this kind of jewel with hundreds and hundreds of facets and almost each of the facets is commenting on all of the other facets and you can kind of look at the jewel through any of the facets and still get a coherent reading. . . there are single panels there, single images, that somehow kind of tie up the whole book.
>
> . . . it's tailor-made for a university class, because there are so many levels and little background details and clever little connections and references in it that it's one that academics can pick over for years. ("Blather" 3-4)

This near-infinite recursiveness of text, of metatext, is indeed what places *Watchmen* at the top of the graphic novel tradition; appropriately, *TIME* recently

ranked it as one of the top 100 English-language novels—and the *only* graphic novel on the list—published since 1923 (Grossman). No other "comic book" has even come close to the depth and complexity of Moore and Gibbons's masterpiece. Yes, the style of *Watchmen*, its clearly postmodern aesthetic, makes rereading rewarding. As one recognizes early on, reading it for the first or the seventh time, upon encountering some of the internet "readers' guides," it begs for symbolic or semiotic cataloguing. But the style also serves its own theme. Moore explains:

> I suddenly thought, "Hey, I can do something here where I've got this radiation sign being screwed on the wall on the other side of the street, which will underline the kind of nuclear threat; and I can have this newspaper guy just ranting, the way that people on the street corners with a lot of spare time sometimes do; and I can have the narrative from this pirate comic that the kid's reading; and I can have them all bouncing off each other; and I can get this really weird thing going where things that are mentioned in the pirate story seem to relate to images in the panel, or to what the newsman is saying. . . ." And that's when *Watchmen* took off; that's when I realized that there was something more important going on than just a darker take on the super-hero. . . . ("Toasting" 4–5)

A comic the "academics can pick over for years," a comic with "something more important going on". . . too like the theme of *Watchmen* itself, these claims suggest that what we have been doing here is precisely what Rorschach and Dr. Manhattan are doing in the novel. The details, we all hope, will lead to some organizing principle, bring order out of chaos. What we may find however, along with our comic cohorts, is that looking closely only makes what we thought to be order more clearly chaotic.

Fredric Wertham, that infamous comic book naysayer of the 50s, thought something very similar. According to Amy Kiste Nyberg, Wertham believed, "'Comic books have nothing to do with drama, with art or literature'" (94). He thought the very act of reading comics stunted children's development and "prevented children from developing an appreciation for good literature. If fed a diet of stories in which the solution to all problems is 'simple, direct, mechanical and violent,' children will be unable to advance to more complex works. . ." (Nyberg 94). Wertham, like Rorschach, looked for patterns in a world he saw as decaying and morally bankrupt. He looked for reasons why children were becoming, as he saw it, less and less empathetic toward others' suffering. He looked for patterns in children's behaviors and found one common denominator: they were reading comics more and more, just as their sense of propriety, their respect for authority, and their ethical foundations seemed to be crumbling. "American love, like coke in green glass bottles. . . . They don't

make it anymore" (*Watchmen* II.25). In *Seduction of the Innocent*, Wertham quotes a young boy who says,

> I read one comic book where they tie people to the trees, tie them in front of stampeding herds. They tie them to the trees, then cut the trees and the sap runs over that person and the bugs are drawn to that sap, then they eat the people. Sometimes they torture girls the same way, by stabbing and beating them. They throw them in rivers and make them swim where alligators come. Sometimes they hit them with weapons on the back. They don't have much on when they hit them with weapons. It excites me a little bit. (55-56)

Wertham responds: "Is it not natural that the Rorschach of the boy shows hostility and aggression?" (56). While he claims to be "one of the first psychiatrists to use [the Rorschach Test] in this country" (56), Wertham also "developed the mosaic test, where patients assembled colored pieces of wood into a freely chosen design that could then be evaluated by psychiatrists. It became an important diagnostic tool in his later work in forensic psychiatry" (Nyberg 87). Of course Wertham's "contribution" to comic scholarship is highly debatable, but so too is the contribution of our main characters in *Watchmen*. At best, they do nothing. At worst, like Jack Nicholson in *Chinatown*, they may invite the very tide of chaos they hope to stem.

In his search for order, one of the patterns in violent comics Fredric Wertham found most disturbing was a tendency toward torture, particularly eye trauma. Again, in *Seduction of the Innocent*, he writes, "The injury-to-the-eye motif is an outstanding example of the brutal attitude cultivated in comic books—the threat or actual infliction of injury to the eyes of a victim, male or female. . . . It has no counterpart in any other literature of the world, for children or for adults" (111). Perhaps Wertham never read any fairy tales or myths ("Cinderella" and *Oedipus Rex* come to mind), but his focus on this type of injury says far more about his overall agenda, the symbolic resonances he wants to invite, than it does about the depth of his "research." Wertham believed that comics were indeed injuring children's eyes, their internal vision. If they looked too long at the brighter, three-color lights of comics, they would no longer appreciate the subtler shades of the true stars (real values, "real" literature). His interest in eye trauma, then, has perhaps less to do with what really happens or doesn't happen in literature, and more to do with what he believes is happening to a new generation of readers, eyes growing occluded by the "stains" of Batman, Wonder Woman, and *Tales from the Crypt*, by any comic that would, today, remind us of *Tales of the Black Freighter*.

Like his favorite inkblot test's namesake, Wertham himself looked for patterns, for signs, perhaps pointlessly. Later, he would write *A Circle of Guilt*

(1956) and *A Sign for Cain* (1966) (Nyberg 100). All of his works, on the page and in Senate hearings would be an attempt to impose order. We, too, can look for order here (real or imagined): Rorschach, eye trauma, circle, sign, stain. . . . But signs are signs. They evolve beyond their boundaries and their genre. Sometimes they evolve beyond their creators. About the creation of the Comedian, Dave Gibbons says,

> . . . I thought, "He doesn't look like a comedian at all," and so, on a whim, I drew a smiley face badge, just to lighten the overall design. It didn't have any particular significance to me, but Alan saw it and was inspired. . . . We decided to show the smiley badge in a gutter full of blood, and then a splash of blood on the badge itself. And when we thought about it some more, that smiley face became a symbol for the whole series. It's the simplest cartoon image; a configuration of lines even a baby would respond to and smile. (Gibbons 80)

Such synchronicity would make Dr. Manhattan smile. It would make Rorschach and Wertham wince. But this is precisely the point of *Watchmen*, of the Rorschach test itself. We may see many things, we may not see at all, but we have to look. We look because we're human. In "The Idea of Order at Key West," Wallace Stevens ponders our human penchant for looking, our "Blessed rage for order. . . . The maker's rage to order," our desire to make meaning out of meaninglessness. Imagining a woman singing by the sea, he says, "The sea was not a mask. No more was she. . . . For she was the maker of the song she sang. The ever-hooded, tragic gestured sea. . . . And when she sang, the sea, / Whatever self it had, became the self / That was her song, for she was the maker" (128–30). Here and in other poems, Stevens agrees with Husserl, with *Watchmen*, suggesting that *we* make what we see, that there would be nothing *to* see if not for the human looking. As a man living two lives (Vice President of an insurance company by day, poet by night), Stevens understood masks, what lies beneath the hood, how all of us, perhaps from the very beginning, have been making faces—God's, Ozymandias', some alien evil's, our own—out of nothing at all.

In 1961, Robert Fantz provided documentation that visual discrimination begins in infancy, that infants actually seek out complex visual patterns, and, when given a choice, seem to prefer what can be perceived as a "face" to more abstract symbols. John Dacey and John Travers put it this way: "Infants. . . show definite preferences based on as much complexity as they can handle. . ." and, they note, "human faces are remarkably complex" (126). In a similar discussion regarding the evolutionary benefit of being able to recognize faces as infants, Carl Sagan connects this ability to the phenomena of seeing a "Man in the Moon" or a "Face" on Mars. Sagan writes, "As an inadvertent side effect, the pattern-recognition machinery in our brains is so efficient in extracting a

face from a clutter of other detail that we sometimes see faces where there are none" (45). He also says, "The Man in the Moon is in fact a record of ancient catastrophes—most of which took place before humans, before mammals, before vertebrates, before multicelled organisms, and probably even before life arose on Earth. It is a characteristic conceit of our species to put a human face on random cosmic violence" (45). One reads these passages and thinks of Ozymandias, of the "happy face" he puts on the violence he has orchestrated; in fact, he says of his actions on behalf of the world, "I would trick it; frighten it towards salvation with history's greatest practical joke" (XI.24).

What are we looking for when we look for order? When we see patterns in the woodwork, in ceiling shadows, in the craters of Mars, or even in comic books, are we truly seeing what we think? Do we have a choice, or are we acting on something that is hardwired? Is what we see always already ourselves? Like humanity, like the Rorschach/Dr. Manhattan binary, like the philosopher Pascal, Moore himself seems to be trapped between two infinitely improbable possibilities: "A Nothing in comparison with the Infinite, an All in comparison with the Nothing, a mean between nothing and everything. Since he is infinitely removed from comprehending the extremes, the end of things and their beginning are hopelessly hidden from him in an impenetrable secret; he is equally incapable of seeing the Nothing from which he was made, and the Infinite in which he is swallowed up" (Pascal 72). In a single interview, Moore offers *two* possible readings of reality. Of his graphic novel, *Big Numbers*, he says,

> The reader turning the first page in issue two will come across a big full-page picture of a coffee cup just after the milk has been put in. What is the semiotic information that they're supposed to get from that, just looking at that cold? It's a massive picture of a tea cup. it will mean nothing to them on one level; it doesn't progress the story. They'll have to look for another layer of meaning. . . . The shapes that can be produced on computers using fractal equations turn out to be the shapes that were previously found in nature and assumed to be completely random. The shapes of clouds, the shapes of coastlines, the distribution of stars, the distribution of blood vessels in the human body, the shape of smoke, the way that a glass breaks, the way that fluids move—all of these things that we previously believed to be random suddenly turn out to be following precise fractal geometrical patterns. . . . ("Toasting" 100–02)

However, Moore goes on to argue,

> Yes, it would seem to be that there is an order that is inescapable. . . [but] that order does not care about us. It is purely mathematical, and much too complex for us to be able to predict. . . . It is beyond our control; chaos is part of the normal, natural order of things. We can't regulate chaos, we can't impose our will upon the world in the way that we've been previously trying to, which I believe that God recommends

> we do in some of the early verses of the Old Testament. It's simply not true that the world is there for man to impose his will upon. (102)

Two eyes, two ways of seeing. . . . Clarity and obscurity, precipice and abyss, the lie of love tiding us over between. . . . Throughout *Watchmen*, the characters are looking for answers: who killed the Comedian? why? to what end? They are looking for who they are—hero or antihero, self or secret identity, first generation or later incarnation—who and how to see. They are looking for order, looking for the very Law that *they* represent, but because they must break that law in order to enforce it, the law itself, like them, is not what it appears to be. In the book, each character comes to realize, in his or her own way, that order doesn't finally exist, except *perhaps* insofar as they are able to define it. Ultimately, meaning is indeterminate. Nevertheless, it is the *looking* that keeps them going, keeps them alive. "Distant and dead resuscitate, / They show as the dial or move as the hands of me," says Whitman, and, "I am the clock myself." Regardless of whether or not the pattern they seek exists—irrespective of the fact that design or law or even love may be as much a myth as Ozymandias's fabricated alien, as his or Jon's false Xanadus, as any lie we fabricate from faith, from its lack—the characters that populate the world of *Watchmen* find *themselves* in seeking. Thus, the text (even its own patterns of symbol) suggests that looking for perfection, for order, for signs, is *itself* imperfection, but, further, that this imperfection is glorious; it makes us human. Looking for meaning (comedy) in evolution (tragedy) *is* our design, it's in our blood, *we* are the stain. *Watchmen*, in its characters and in its symbols, tells us that we *must* see what we see through the obscurity and glory of our own seeing, must watch the large made up of the minute, the minutes become men. *We* watch the watchmen. We *are* the watchmen.

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