

NOTES TOWARD A SUPER FICTION:
REVISION, TEMPORALITY AND THE SUPERHERO GENRE

by

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Abstract

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Notes Toward a Super Fiction argues for the recognition of the superhero as a distinct narrative genre that offers provocative ways of conceptualizing the process of revision. This recognition involves an exploration of the idiosyncratic narrative temporality of the genre, as well as the manner in which perpetual revision has evolved as a negotiation of that temporality. Particular emphasis is placed on the parallels to issues concerning revision within the field of composition studies. Chapter One situates the superhero within the emerging discourse of comics studies by examining the contested definitions and histories of three key terms: *comics*; *comic book*; and *superhero*. Chapter Two explores how shifting ideas of the nature and purpose of revision have emerged from and contributed to the temporal ambiguity characteristic of the superhero genre throughout its history, a narrative condition that Eco describes as *oneiric*. Chapter Three links these shifts to historical transformations regarding revision within composition studies, emphasizing the recent tendency of the field to view revision as embedded in the politics of cultural and institutional authority rather than the practice of textual production. Chapter Four explores potential alternative paradigms of revision as a textual

practice through close readings of three superhero narratives that can be described as *metarevisionary*: Kurt Busiek's "The Nearness of You;" Warren Ellis *Planetary*; and Alan Moore's *Supreme: The Story of the Year*. The dissertation concludes by suggesting parallels between the revision strategies explored in the previous chapter and Fredric Jameson's framing of the utopian as irreducible multiplicity, which in turn echoes Deleuze's reading of Nietzschean difference as an alternative to Hegelian dialectics.

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Chapter One

Generic Revulsion: The Superhero and Comics Studies

In “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” Wallace Stevens reflects upon the fact that certain poetic figures seem to lose their potency over time. The reason that the famous figure of the soul as composite image of charioteer and winged horses from Plato’s *Phaedrus* no longer affects us poetically, “. . .is that in it, the imagination adheres to what is unreal. What happened, as we were traversing the whole heaven, is that the imagination lost its power to sustain us. It has the strength of reality or none at all” (7). The difference between these fallen figures and those that remain vital is seen in their contrasting effects upon the reader: “As to that, while we are moved by it, we are moved as observers. We recognize it perfectly. We do not realize it. We understand the feeling of it, the robust feeling, clearly and fluently communicated. Yet we understand it rather than participate in it” (7).

Wallace Stevens may seem an odd choice to begin an exploration of the superhero as narrative genre, although as a figure, the reticent insurance lawyer whose bland demeanor masks the absconded power of a great poet fits rather smoothly with the iconic type. However, it is even odder to contemplate the possibility that the narratives featuring that misunderstood figure, the superhero, have this strength of reality, and that, while the particular manifestations of this strength have changed and will likely continue to change, its imaginative force does indeed adhere to what is real. The fact that this may strike many as strange, that few narrative creations seem less real than those featuring anatomically-impossible figures in outlandish primary-colored garb who can leap tall buildings in a single bound, while true, may say more about the limitations of truth as a

criterion by which to evaluate the effects of fiction than it does about any work or genre of fiction itself. When interpreted with the participation that Stevens contrasts with the limits of understanding, the superhero, like *The Noble Rider*, can be read, and more importantly *written*, as an exploration of the curious nature of fiction, and the operative workings of the interplay between imagination and reality. As Stevens writes in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction”: “Life’s nonsense pierces us with strange relation” (3. 21).

Stevens’ reflections touch upon two strange relations of particular importance to serious study of the superhero. The first of these involves his distinction between understanding and participation as opposing points of the spectrum of a reader’s response to aesthetic figures. This is of course relevant to all students of popular culture, who frequently find themselves walking a critical tightrope suspended between the presumed objectivity of the academic and the passionate devotion of the fan. Academic forays into the genre are further complicated by the fact that, until recently, serious reflections on the superhero as cultural and narrative phenomenon have been undertaken almost exclusively within the discursive space of fandom. From early fanzines such as *Alter Ego*, to the paratextual phenomenon of published letter pages of fan reaction within the comic books themselves, to the more serious and influential critiques of *The Comics Journal*, intense and passionate forums of expression and exchange have thrived and continue to thrive within the fan community. For the most part, these forums view recent academic interest with a combination of bemusement and distrust:

While a fan-based criticism has flourished for decades, even in its most above-ground forum (the elitist yet persistently anti-intellectual *Comics Journal*), the work still rests on pre-critical assumptions in which

authorship is valorized as personal expression. Fan-critics often dismiss the few scholars who make forays into comics criticism for taking too seriously material that the fans themselves are nevertheless devoted to collecting and annotating. Writers for and readers of *The Comics Journal*, *Hogan's Alley*, *Alter Ego*, and *Wizard* remain happily oblivious to the last half-century of theoretical approaches to popular culture. Marxism, semiotics, psychoanalysis, and feminism still await successful application to the comics industry. (Creekmur 283)

The stigmatization of this community by mainstream as well as academic culture has intensified the collective identity that Henry Jenkins recognizes as symptomatic of modern fandom, the drive “to forge an alliance with a community of others in defense of tastes which, as a result, cannot be read as totally aberrant or idiosyncratic” (*Textual Poachers* 23). The enduring remnants of cultural opinion that deem the superhero unworthy of serious scholarly attention, residue of historical judgments of the superhero genre and the comic-book publication format inextricably linked to it as powerful symbols of ignorance and lack of education, has deepened the emotional and intellectual chasm that separates Comics Fan from Comics Scholar.¹

Furthermore, the elevation in status that the comics medium has undergone in recent academic discourse has been due in large part to the influence of works that fall outside the generic conventions of the superhero narrative and the formal constraints of the comic book: Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis*, Allison Bechdel’s

¹ For a detailed history and analysis of fan culture as it relates to comic books and the superhero, see Matthew J. Pustz’s excellent *Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers*.

Fun Home, to name a few prominent examples. However, a collateral effect of the well-deserved acceptance of these and other works has been the relegation to secondary status of the commercially-driven generic texts that dominated the comics medium for much of its history. Thus the superhero, most notorious of these victims of generic revulsion, remains marginalized as childish, indulged in shamefully, if at all, by intelligent adults; the reign of the leveling Muse that inspires so much contemporary scholarship in the fields that comprise the shifting terrains of English studies has yet to extend over it. As a subject of academic inquiry, the superhero still needs to be introduced by way of an apology.

But Stevens' essay offers more than a provisional framework for reflections on the tensions between fandom and academia, as important as these may be to an understanding of the evolving status of the superhero as object of scholarly discourse. His ruminations on the figure of the charioteer are at their core meditations on the complex and ambiguous position of fiction within time, and thus on the ontological status of fiction itself. The image of the charioteer, like all fictions, is more fluid than fixed; its potencies and potential meanings shift and change through participation in the temporal world. As such, the image is embedded in the ongoing narrative of its reception, a "traversing the whole heaven" which for Stevens is marked less by continuity than by *rupture*. The charioteer is thus not a talisman whose preserved truth is maintained in an unbroken chain of time-binding handoffs from one generation to the next; rather, it is an unfolding tale that tells itself by means of a series of *breaks*, temporal markers of diachronic discontinuity, salt points where past and future fictions ebb and flow and sometimes coalesce in the foam.

While these breaks indicate movements away from continuity, they also can serve an opposite function. Rarely, if ever, does any emerging narrative proceed so smoothly as to avoid diegetic challenges to its own sense of uninterrupted flow. Within that flow, the crisis represented by rupture frequently serves less as destroyer of narrative continuity than as prelude to the reestablishment of harmony on a different plain. Whether the governing frame through which we interpret this reestablishment is that of Hegelian synthesis, or of Kuhn's paradigm shifts, or even Greimas' semiotic square, the basic idea is the same: the narrative role of rupture is to serve as herald and precursor of a new stability. As such, the breaks in continuity are the foundations upon which all revisions and re-workings of a text depend. They thus partake of both similitude and difference, and stand as types of liminal moments in the weaving of a narrative, situated between the establishment of continuity on the one hand, and the potential for disruption on the other.

This interplay between continuity and disruption is at the heart of the two discourses that this dissertation will place in conversation with each other: the fractured narrative temporality of the superhero genre, so aptly deemed *oneiric* by Umberto Eco (114); and the struggles within contemporary composition studies to reestablish the relevance of textual practices in the wake of the sea changes within the discipline frequently characterized as "the social turn". The nexus of this conversation is a mutual concern with the idea of revision as the practice of negotiating disruptions of continuity. A close study of the superhero genre reveals that constant and ongoing revision is the compositional tactic through which new texts negotiate the powerful struggle between reiteration of the genre's past, and creative expression of its future. These multiple and ongoing revisions offer a way of rethinking the revising process in composition. Instead

of a gradual succession of improved renditions of a text, each one effacing and superseding the imperfections of its predecessors, revision is revealed as the production of multiple versions whose differences and diversities are “capable of being in uncertainties”, as Keats describes the creative attitude which he terms Negative Capability (41): ontologically equal textual variations that wear their inconsistencies openly, and reject the pressure to resolve their multiplicities into the synthetic continuity of a polished final text.

A great challenge facing any attempt to reframe revision in this manner is the reconciliation of anti-foundational critiques of revision with functional composing strategies. It is relatively easy to call into question the concept of improvement as a goal of revision; it is much more difficult to provide an alternative for teachers of writing, operating under the dual and often conflicting influences of institutional demands and reflective practice. And so one encounters a manifestation of a pervasive pattern in recent composition studies: powerful and radical critiques of expressivist and cognitive paradigms that are the foundations of the discipline that fail to provide alternative models and practices to take their place. The superhero narrative provides an approach to revision that is both critical of traditional models as well as deeply rooted in the production of texts; thus, it offers a potential bridge between the often-increasing distance separating theoretical critique and practical advice so common in contemporary composition studies. It is itself a study in revision, a perpetual negotiation between the demands of narrative consistency and discontinuity, as well as of the marketplace and creative expression. In this respect the composers of superhero fiction parallel the teacher of writing, so often situated amidst competing visions of composition as skill, as self-

discovery, as ticket to entry into academic discourse, as institutional necessity. Like the unfolding tale of composition studies, the diachronic tradition of the superhero both shapes and is shaped by these competing, often contradictory influences.

Comics Studies

While academic acceptance of the superhero remains ambivalent, there is little doubt that comics as a whole are increasingly considered a legitimate field of scholarly interest. Writing in 2006, Hilary Chute, one of the pioneers and leaders in this field, summarized several of the most significant indicators of the growing respect accorded to the emerging field of what has begun to refer to itself as Comics Studies:

There is a "Comics Scholars' Discussion List," housed at the University of Florida, which also holds an annual comics conference every spring. There are peer-reviewed journals devoted to comics, such as the *International Journal of Comic Art*, which began in 1999 (and is hard to find), and *ImageText*, which began in 2004 (and is readily available online).
 ("Decoding Comics" 1015)

Charles Hatfield has more recently added several additional markers of scholarly status:

... the University Press of Mississippi has published a long and varied list in comics studies...In addition, Yale University Press has produced a number of books in or relating to comics studies...several academic journals have devoted symposia or special issues to comics and visual narrative, among them *American Periodicals*, *English Language Notes*, *Modern Fiction Studies*, *PS: Political Science and Politics*, and *SCAN*:

Journal of Media Arts Culture. Finally — and this will be especially poignant for those who, like me, work in English Studies or other fields of Literature — consider the recently-approved petition to launch an MLA (Modern Language Association) discussion group for Comics & Graphic Narratives. This effort, the culmination of a growing trend in comics scholarship at the MLA, has been spearheaded by Hillary Chute of Harvard and will lead to the organization of said discussion group at the 2010 MLA convention ... Equally encouraging is the MLA's forthcoming *Approaches to Teaching the Graphic Novel*, edited by Stephen Tabachnick, among many signs of the accelerating interest in teaching comics at colleges and universities. (“The State of Comics Studies”)

Hatfield's impressive list, however, is prelude to his analysis of the still-tenuous position of comics studies within academia, a situation that he attributes to three main characteristics: a lack of solid institutional footing; absence of disciplinary cohesion and identity; and the absence of the sense of scholarship building upon prior scholarship, which he expresses as a tendency for every “new” academic work to reinvent the wheel. These conditions are not necessarily problematic; a multiplicity of approaches and perspectives drawn from a wide range of fields of interest can in fact be viewed as one of the strengths of comic studies, particularly at a time when disciplinarity within academia often seems to be collapsing under its own weight. However, his appraisal serves as a useful and sobering reminder of the nascent status of comics studies within academia, and of how this status impacts and influences the direction of scholarship within this emerging field.

Powerful among these directions is the strategy of elevating the serious study of comics by means of distinguishing recent non-mainstream works from the popular genres associated with the commercially driven industry, of which the superhero stands as emblem and synecdoche. Hatfield's recent and otherwise-excellent book *Alternative Comics* illustrates this strategy. In his attempts to argue for the acceptance of certain contemporary comics as "a literary and artistic form deserving of sustained attention" (xi), he achieves this elevation in status by belittling the "familiar, anodyne conventions of the commercial comics mainstream" (ix), and the "colorful yet diversionary byways of familiar market genres such as the superhero" (3). Turning his attention to Michael Chabon's novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, Hatfield summarizes this stance towards the superhero: "Such stories are hard to resist, stuffed as they are with color and life, but they risk romanticizing what was at bottom a bluntly commercial and exploitative business, one that, with rare exceptions, produced work of flickering quality and slight ambition" (10).

There is certainly reason to understand, and even empathize, with this resistance towards acknowledging the quality and value of commercial comics and the genres associated with them. In large part this reluctance arises from the conflation in popular consciousness of one particular genre, the superhero, with the entirety of comics. It is easy to become frustrated with the widespread unfamiliarity of most scholars, not to mention laymen, with the rich, international, multi-generic history of the medium; the wearisome task of explaining yourself and your field of study to those whose default associations are of a genre that bears the marks of a history of intellectual debasement and dismissal can be quite frustrating. In addition, it is perhaps inevitable that the

insecurities accompanying any emerging discipline seek refuge in strategies that attempt to resist the attacks of dominant cultural attitudes by selectively collaborating with them. But it is unnecessary and unfortunate that the elevation of the alternative texts justifiably lauded by Hatfield be accomplished through the denigration of the generic texts that comprise important chapters in the history of comics, and in the evolution and development of the comic book as distinct publication format. To draw an analogy from an academic discipline which may serve as a paradigm for future comics studies departments, it would be akin to film scholars feeling the need to justify the study of experimental filmmakers such as Stan Brakhage by illustrating their superiority to the mainstream genre films of John Ford. Within the disciplinary borders of film studies, there is room for both.

Even in comparison with academic attention toward other popular media, genres, and publication formats, the superhero has been an underexplored phenomenon. Corey Creekmur summarizes the situation as follows:

Unlike the underground comix associated with Art Spiegelman, the mainstream American comic book, especially in its most enduring form, which features the serialized adventures of costumed superheroes, remains casually dismissed and critically neglected, despite periodic bids for cultural legitimacy. Even given their recent elevation as "graphic novels" or "sequential narratives," comics have not been given the kind of scholarly attention afforded the dime novel, series romance, hard-boiled detective story, or pulp sf, much less Hollywood cinema, that other major American mode of genre-based visual-verbal narrative. (283)

In order to explore the roots of this marginalized status more fully, the generic conventions of the superhero need to be situated within the evolving frameworks of comics studies. This task is all the more difficult due to the frequent lack of clarity and consistency regarding basic terminology that is both symptom of and contributing factor to the instability and uncertainty surrounding the field. Even the most tentative attempts at definition and delimitation are obstructed by a lack of consensus regarding the employment of certain frequently used terms. As a result, there has been, and continues to be, a powerful tendency to blur fundamental distinctions, so that when one encounters the terms *comics*, *comic book*, or *graphic novel*, it is often unclear as to whether one is referring to a *medium*, a *publication format*, or a *genre*. This tendency is abetted by the traditional English-language term *comics*, which derives from the conflation of an early dominant genre expressed within the medium, namely situational and gag-based comedy, with the medium itself: “This problem does not exist in the “Bilderstreifen” of Germany, “bande dessinée” of France and “fumetti” of Italy, which have no immediate connections to the “comic” and, in fact, call attention to intrinsic qualities of the comics as a narrative medium” (Bongco 50).²

The resulting situation has led some to propose alternative medial terms: Will Eisner’s *sequential art*, and more recently Chute’s *graphic narrative* (“Comics as Literature?” 453). In addition to avoiding the conflation between genre and form, both these terms successfully emphasize formal medial qualities in a way that *comics* fails to do. Nevertheless, they seem somewhat unwieldy, even pretentious: part and parcel of the

² It is worth noting that, while certain publication formats and genres are powerfully associated with particular countries, as for example the comic book and superhero genre with the United States, the comics medium is a decidedly international phenomenon. In addition, the lack of scholarly attention paid to the medium in the English-speaking world until recently is in marked contrast to Francophonic academia. For a summary of this tradition of scholarship, see Miller.

movement to legitimize the medium at the price of belittling much of its textual past. Whatever its origins and accompanying baggage, *comics* is a term that has become embedded in the English-speaking world; attempting to rehabilitate the medium by renaming it may prove to be a cure worse than the disease.

Additional confusion arises between the ongoing conflation of the publication format commonly known as the comic book with the genre most famously associated with it, that of the superhero. Although the American comic book has contained a variety of narrative genres during its history (horror, science fiction, romance, crime, funny animal, westerns, to name but a few), the long form serial publication format and the superhero genre are so powerfully identified with each other as to be often interchangeable in usage.³ When coupled with the afore-mentioned denigration of the superhero genre, this conflation of terminology is aptly summarized by Douglas Wolk: “Comic book” as a pejorative basically means “characteristic of superhero comics” (Wolk 89). To Wolk’s observation one might add that, even today, any non-pejorative uses of the term outside of the communities of readers who must be characterized as among the already-converted are difficult to find. Rather, *comic book* continues to serve as synonym for and paradigm of childish and simplistic narrative. In order to proceed with some clarity regarding these blurred distinctions, I propose to briefly summarize some of the key issues that have arisen within comics studies regarding the following three interrelated categories: comics as medium; the comic book; and the superhero genre.

³ Wright’s *Comic Book Nation* provides a detailed account of the multigeneric history of the American comic book.

Comics: The Impossible Definition?

Attempts to define comics, perhaps in common with all attempts to define anything as multifaceted as a medium, have tended towards two extremes: they are either so specific that they exclude many texts that both tradition and common sense would include; or else they are so broad as to be functionally useless. Thierry Groonstein has somewhat pessimistically characterized this as a Quixotic quest for “the impossible definition” (12). Despite this cautionary advice, it is important to review some of the more influential attempts that have been made, even if they all amount to flawed attempts to eff the ineffable, so to speak.

The most famous attempt at definition comes from Scott McCloud’s landmark *Understanding Comics*:

Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer.

(9)

It is noteworthy that McCloud’s definition attempts to be purely formal, avoiding any references to generic content or mode of publication. This distinguishes it from earlier definitions such as that of Bill Blackbeard, who defines a comic as follows:

A serially published, episodic, open-ended dramatic narrative or series of linked anecdotes about recurrent identified characters, told in successive drawings regularly enclosing ballooned dialogue or its equivalent and generally minimal narrative text. (41)

Blackbeard identifies several elements that are of great importance to an understanding of the superhero genre: seriality, open-endedness, recurrent characters. However, these elements are not intrinsic to the medium itself, but rather to particular publication formats and genres. In addition, frequently-employed formal elements such as word balloons, rectangular text boxes, and the separation of the flow of images into discrete panels, while common to the point of ubiquity, are neither universal nor essential to the medium; rather, they are historically and culturally contingent devices.⁴ That these elements have become so widespread testifies to their effectiveness as clarifying devices. However, to elevate panel separation to the level of defining feature of the comics medium would be similar to asserting that the separation of words is an essential feature of writing, thereby denying *scripta continua* its historical and medial status as writing. McCloud thus distinguishes his definition as avoiding the powerful tendency to confuse the accidental with the essential:

...our definition says nothing about superheroes or funny animals.
 Nothing about fantasy/science fiction or reader age. No genres are listed in our definition, no types of subject matter, no styles of prose or poetry.
 Nothing is said about paper or ink. No printing process is mentioned...No materials are ruled out...no tools are prohibited. There is no mention of black lines and flat colored ink. No calls for exaggerated anatomy or for representational art of any kind. No schools of art are banished by our

⁴ The early history of these formal innovations and the pioneers of their usage are summarized by Sabin 11-25 and McCloud 10-19. For a general analysis of the compositional applications of these formal elements, see Eisner. For a semiotic analysis of said elements, see Groensteen, especially 24-102.

definition. No philosophies, no movements, no ways of seeing are out of bounds! (22)

An alternative definition of comics is offered by Robert C. Harvey, who emphasizes the hybrid nature of comics as a combination of *word* and *picture*:

It seems to me that the essential characteristic of “comics”— the thing that distinguishes it from other kinds of pictorial narratives— is the incorporation of verbal content. I even go so far as to say that in the best examples of the art form, words and pictures blend to achieve a meaning that neither conveys alone without the other. (75-76)

At first glance, Harvey’s identification of hybridity as at least one of the defining characteristics of comics seems justifiable, even obvious. However, if accepted, Harvey’s definition would exclude several key works that authorial intention, audience reception, and general custom identify as belonging to the comics medium, which do not employ verbal language. In David Berona’s discussion of the narrative techniques utilized by wordless comics creators, he observes that, while the absence of words somewhat alters the experiential task of the reader, the fundamental differences are not of kind, but of degree:

...the lack of traditional text and word balloons in these wordless comics makes an added demand on both the artist and the reader. The artist has to insure a clear flow of the narrative and the reader has to discern more intently all the elements in each panel or page in order to follow the story clearly (20).

Therefore, although many, even most comics texts involve complex interplay between word and picture, it is less an essential characteristic of the medium than a frequently-used compositional pattern.

In addition, Harvey's use of the word *blend* oversimplifies the complexity of the relationship between word and image in those comics that employ both:

Highly textured in its narrative scaffolding, comics doesn't blend the visual and the verbal— or use one simply to illustrate the other— but is rather prone to present the two nonsynchronously; a reader of comics not only fills in the gaps between panels but also works with the often disjunctive back-and-forth of *reading* and *looking* for meaning. (Chute, "Comics as Literature?" 452)

This dissonant interplay between word and image distinguishes comics from texts in which pictorial imagery is used as a scaffolding device to aid developing readers in navigating verbal text, as for example the children's picture book, or intermittently throughout a primarily verbal text, as in illustrated novels.

A further objection to Harvey's definition is contained in Dale Jacobs' recent application of the New London group's research on multimodal theories of literacy to comics. Jacobs' research indicates that, as pattern, the word-picture binary is itself a reductive simplification of a more complex interplay of expressive modes, and thus limited in its ability to adequately explain the multiple levels of meaning-making available through the comics medium. In addition to the *linguistic* and the *visual*, Jacobs notes four other design elements at work in comics: the *gestural*(facial expression and

body positioning); the *audio*(representations of diegetic sound effects through variant lettering techniques); the *spatial*(the layout and design of the page as a whole; the relation of panels to each other and to the empty spaces of the white gutters that separate them; the relative size of panels); and the *multimodal*(the meaningful effects produced by the aesthetic manipulation of the other five design elements in relation to each other and to the whole). Thus, negotiating a comics text involves familiarity with several literacies: “Knowledge of linguistic, audio, visual, gestural, and spatial conventions within comics affects the ways in which we read and the meanings we assign to texts, just as knowledge of conventions within word-based literacy affects the ways in which those texts are read” (“More Than Words” 24).

Another valuable quality of McCloud’s definition is its ability to distinguish the comics medium from the hybrid medium most frequently compared with it, that of film. It is tempting to overemphasize the formal medial similarities between film and comics, not least for the fact that film studies provides a model for the successful navigation of the path towards academic and institutional acceptance of a contemporary popular art form. However, to use Pascal Lefèvre’s phrase, film and comics partake of incompatible visual ontologies (1). McCloud notes that a film, if it were viewed not through a projector but rather by unspooling the reel and “reading” it frame by frame, would qualify as an extremely slow-paced comic. However, when viewed as intended, film’s sequentiality is temporal, while that of comics is spatial:

Each successive frame of a movie is projected on exactly the same space—the screen—while each frame of comics must occupy a different space. Space does for comics what time does for film. (7)

In contradistinction to film, comics create narrative temporality through the spatial juxtaposition of static imagery:

Panels are arranged on a page, panels are static drawings and a comic book does not make noise or sound. Film is quite different. First, there is a screen frame, second, the film images are moving and photographic, third, film has a soundtrack. (Lefèvre 3)

Thierry Groensteen contrasts the articulation of comics imagery with that of film by offering a formal distinction based upon Deleuze's famous description of cinematic images as simultaneously movement-image and time-image, a distinction for which Groensteen coins the term *spatio-topia*:

Comics panels, situated relationally, are, necessarily, placed in relation to space and operate on a share of space. These are the fundamental principles of this spatial distribution that will be examined at the sign of the spatio-topia, a term created by gathering, while maintaining distinct, the concept of space (*espace*) and that of place (*lieu*). (21)

When combined with the jaundiced view of comics as anti-literate, the misleading similarities between comics and film have contributed greatly to a widespread notion that the value of comics is not to be found through the study of their narratives, but rather in the pictorial value of occasional and sporadic panels and pages of visual art removed from their narrative contexts. Images pulled out of narrative context are “discovered”, or rather “liberated”, from the narrative juvenilia in which they were previously buried. Art Spiegelman's criticism of Roy Lichtenstein's work is applicable here:

I have all sorts of issues with the idea that a Lichtenstein painting of a comic book panel is art but the original comic panel it draws on is not considered art....I hate that whole attitude and way of looking at this stuff. Lichtenstein did for comics what Warhol did for Campbell's Soup — it had nothing to do with comics. It had to do with exploiting the form without any of the content. (Corliss)

The situation is analogous to the following hypothetical scenario. Imagine a museum exhibit of John Ford's *The Searchers*; enlarged framed stills from the film are arranged on the walls, each with a card describing their visual composition, the names of the actors, cinematographic data. While a worthwhile exhibit, the experience would not replace the viewing of the film. The very idea of *film* itself, if this became the prevalent means of institutional canonization of the medium, would be reduced to a storing-house of still images, some of which, when removed from the ephemeral low-culture motion picture encasement, might be proclaimed worthy of the term *work of art*.

Moreover, McCloud's emphasis on sequence over hybridity underscores the narrative nature of the medium, the overlooking of which can lead to the misguided, yet still widespread belief that comics are meant to be *looked at*, rather than *read*. Hatfield sees this belief as an underlying assumption that gives credence to the long-standing view of comics as competition to, rather than sponsor of, "real" reading:

Yet it is by no means clear that comics are universally regarded as a *reading* experience. Indeed, the recent insistence on comics-as-reading seems designed to counter a long-lived tradition of professional writing

that links comics with illiteracy and the abdication of reading as a civilized (and civilizing) tool. (*Alternative Comics* 33)

Fundamentally, the appropriate institutional home for comics is the library rather than the museum, at least until the equivalent of the Museum of Modern Art's basement film screening room can be found or devised. The distinction is essential: from the point of view of the museum, comics are a *stylistic* phenomenon; from that of the library, the proper perspective is a *narratological* one.

The Comic Book

The *comic book* is a specific periodical publication format, with its own distinct history of material production. It is this history that distinguishes the comic book from other comics formats, as for example the *comic strip*. Hatfield distinguishes between these two most popular American publication formats:

The history of comic art has been bound up in the history of certain *packages* or publishing formats. In the United States, the most dominant of these packages have been the newspaper comics page and the "comic book." The former consists of a miscellany of features and genres, most bound by the rigid constraints of the daily strip or the Sunday; it appears within the larger miscellany of the newspaper, and comics produced for it are seen as secondary features at best. The so-called comic book, on the other hand, is a small, self-contained magazine or pamphlet (roughly half-tabloid in size). In the early days of the industry, this magazine incorporated a miscellany of features, both narrative and non-narrative;

more recently, though, it has come to concentrate on a single character or group of characters and, more often than not, a single story (typically between eighteen and twenty-four page in length). (*Alternative Comics* 4)

Thus, the two main factors that distinguish the comic book from the comic strip are comparative length, and primary or secondary status as textual product conveyed within a larger format. When taken in conjunction with its affordability as a commodity, the status of comic books as self-contained independent format contributed to its historic role as product marketed for youth as a consumer class. Cultural historian Brandon Wright sees the comic book as a key factor in the growing awareness of the potential value of texts marketed primarily towards a youthful clientele: “Whereas comic strips are a syndicated feature in newspapers sold to a mass and mostly adult audience, comic books are created, distributed, and sold on their own merits to a paying and overwhelmingly young audience” (xiii-xiv). This distinction leads Wright to observe that the comic book played an important historical role in the emerging notion of youth culture in the United States, in particular as a distinct consumer class. This observation leads Wright to see the American comic book as precursor to commercial art genres marketed primarily for young consumers, such as rock and roll music:

Although aesthetic criticism tends to compare comic books with visual media like film, culturally they have more in common with rock-and-roll music. Like rock-and-roll, comic books responded to the emergence of adolescents as a discrete market with tastes and preoccupations of its own, sometimes in direct conflict with the mores of mainstream adult culture.

Comic books, in fact, preceded rock-and-roll by two decades as one of the

first entertainment products marketed directly to children and adolescents instead of their parents. (xvi)

Comic books thus quickly became embroiled in broader cultural debates concerning children's leisure activities, and adult fears of the consequences of leaving these activities unregulated. These fears initially manifested themselves in Arnoldian terms as part of the struggle between high and low culture and art: "From the outset, symbols of social authority over childhood and children's reading, particularly teachers and librarians, defined comic book reading as a problem. They expressed fears that the comic book was leading children away from better literature and creating a generation of semi-literates" (Nyberg viii). Thus, comic books long were viewed as having a harmful effect on reading ability rather than being a sign of emerging literacy, a view that endured even when early research challenged its validity:

Despite these research findings, the criticism of comic books persisted because the fears about comic books, rather than being based on empirical evidence, were rooted in adult beliefs and attitudes about children's leisure time activities. Adults' concern stemmed in large part from fears that children's culture, especially the control of leisure reading, had escaped traditional authority... The struggle between children's taste and adult authority was presented as a "challenge" to be faced and a "battle" to be won; adults sought to substitute their own choices for the comic books favored by children. (Nyberg viii)

Thus, the fundamental issue at the heart of the sentiment against the comic book was one of social control exerted by one generation over a younger one.

Although these concerns arose almost simultaneously with the first signs of the format's mass popularity with young readers, a significant level of sustained public focus was not achieved until the early post-World War II era.⁵ At this point, a shift occurred: whereas comic books were formerly viewed primarily as a threat to education and cultivation, they became associated with post-War fears concerning juvenile delinquency. This linkage catalyzed concerted attacks against comic books on both the local and national level. These efforts culminated in two important historical developments whose impact on the subsequent history of the publication format proved significant: the publication of Dr. Frederic Wertham's jeremiad against the industry, *Seduction of the Innocent*, followed by the United States Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency's April 1954 hearings to investigate the comic book industry, at which Wertham was a star witness. These hearings led to the establishment of the Comics Code Authority (CCA) in the fall of 1954, a self-regulating agency modeled on the film industry's Hays Office that radically altered the range of permissible comic book content.⁶

The restrictions imposed by code standards contributed to the appropriation of the comic book format by the underground comic creators during the 1960s, and thus played a central role in the later development of the emerging category of alternative comics. While the genealogy of alternative comics can be traced to earlier texts such as the

⁵ For a more detailed account of early activist protests against comic books, see Hajdu 71-91 and Nyberg 1-21.

⁶ Hajdu and Nyberg both explore these events in great detail. See Hajdu 91-111 and Nyberg 85-103.

Tijuana bibles of the 1930s and 1940s and the satirical *Mad* comics (later reformatted as a larger-sized magazine, at least in part to avoid the restrictions of the CCA), it was the advent of the underground comic books of the 1960s that catalyzed the contemporary alternative scene. The combination of inexpensive production costs and the independent and alternative means of distribution provided by head shops and other countercultural sites of commerce proved a powerful catalyst for comics artists seeking outlets for creative expression in the long form other than those afforded through the Code-regulated publishing houses and their sanctioned genres:

...there was an anti-Comics Code reaction, which provided a kind of negative impetus to underground creators. As children, these were the very people who had been worst hit by the 1950s scare— sometimes having their comics collections torn up by their parents, or thrown on the playground fires. Now it was time for payback: where the Code had stipulated ‘no violence’, ‘no sex’, ‘no drugs’ and ‘no social relevance’, the underground comix would indulge themselves to the maximum in every category. (Sabin 92)

The success of Robert Crumb’s *Zap Comics* in 1967 catalyzed the evolution of an alternative industry composed of independent and self publishers willing and eager to explore themes and utilize imagery in violation of code standards:

Crumb spoke for everybody. Plus he had the guts to do these comic books. He reinvented the comic book. Took it over just as other people of his generation took over music. He just said, ‘No, you can’t have it that way.

We're gonna make it the way we want it!' That's an incredible thing to have done. There are very few people that you can say literally became the starting point for a whole movement. (Skinn 22-23)

The underground comic movement, which sought to distinguish themselves by using the term *comix* as self-description of their texts, provided a forum for creative expression outside of the generic, formal, and thematic constraints imposed by mainstream industrial standards. As such, it played a central role in the evolution of the contemporary graphic novel.

The recently-popularized term *graphic novel* is best understood as signifying the publication format primarily consisting of trade paperbacks of substantially greater length and durability than the traditional comic book. There is some debate as to the origin of the term. Hilary Chute locates its *telos* in the desire of the underground producers of comics to free their work from the previously-described negative attitudes associated with mainstream works: "*Graphic novel*— which took shape as a marketing term— has a specific history in the second half of the twentieth century. Part of the impetus came from a vital underground publishing community that wanted works with greater impact in the medium of comics..." ("Comics as Literature" 453).

The new term not only freed texts from the stigmatic associations of mainstream comics; it also distanced new works from the stereotypes of the underground scene, and its perceived preoccupation with the 1960s countercultural themes of drugs, sex, and rock and roll. Thus, works that staked new thematic ground such as the groundbreaking *Maus*

by Art Spiegelman could avoid the restrictive preconceptions and expectations of both mainstream and underground comic book consumers and sites of distribution.

Chute is critical of the term as incorrectly implying that all the texts gathered under its heading are in fact novels: "...*graphic novel* is often a misnomer. Many fascinating works grouped under this umbrella— including Spiegelman's World War II-focused *Maus*, which helped rocket the term into public consciousness— aren't novels at all: they are rich works of non-fiction" (453). In its place, she proposes the more-inclusive term *graphic narrative*: "In *graphic narrative*, the substantial length implied by *novel* remains intact, but the term shifts to accommodate modes other than fiction" (453). Despite Chute's persuasive argument, the Graphic Novel sections that can now be found in nearly every major commercial book store testify to the fact that the term, like *comics* itself, while misleading, is here to stay.

The Superhero Genre

In attempting to frame the multitude of textual, social, and political practices that together form and inform the Utopian genre, Fredric Jameson notes:

...the inventory has a convenient and indispensable starting point: it is, of course, the inaugural text of Thomas More(1517)...Two related genres have had similar miraculous births: the historical novel, with *Waverly* in 1814, and Science Fiction (whether one dates that from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in the same year or Wells' *The Time Machine* in 1895. (57)

To these examples of inaugural texts, one must add the generic birth of the superhero in 1938, with the publication of *Action Comics v. 1* and the first appearance of Superman.

The story of Superman's textual creation, the constant rejections by newspapers and syndicates, until its eventual publication in, and phenomenal success as the first star product of the still-fledgling periodical format of the comic book, is almost as famous as the fictional story of the character itself:

Superman may have arrived from a distant planet, but his real origins lay in Cleveland, Ohio. It was there in 1934 that two high-school students and aspiring comic strip writers named Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster created the character. Lower-middle-class, second-generation Jewish immigrants, Siegel and Shuster believed in the American dream and embraced popular culture. Shy and unpopular in school, unsuccessful with girls, and insecure about their bespectacled appearance and physical abilities, they read body-building magazines, lost themselves in science-fiction magazines, and nurtured fantasies of power and success. If only it could be as easy as removing one's glasses. The epitome of the modern adolescent fantasy, Superman was the ideal that spawned an industry. (Wright 1)

It is important to remember that Superman, in common with Jameson's other examples of generic birth through inaugural texts, does not represent a complete and total break with the past. Neither Superman nor the genre that followed in his wake arose *ex nihilo*; the superhero is an original, not an aboriginal, creation, emerging from a *bricolage* of traditions that had formerly been perceived as disparate and disconnected: early American Science Fiction, most notoriously Phillip Wylie's *Gladiator*, and the fan culture that it stimulated; early translations and popularized appropriations of Nietzschean philosophy, in particular Thomas Commons' 1909 translation *Thus Spake*

Zarathustra; pulp fiction characters such as Doc Savage and the Shadow; newspaper comic strips such as Alex Raymond's *Tarzan* and *Flash Gordon* and the several early 1930s American film versions of the same featuring Buster Crabbe and Johnny Weissmuller; contemporaneous Hollywood fascination with the extraordinary as exemplified most vividly by Universal Studio's horror films; the residual popularity of Houdini; prototypical celebrity bodybuilders Eugene Sandow and Charles Atlas and their early media marketing strategies; circus and carnival strongmen; Segar's newspaper strip *Thimble Theater* with its breakout character Popeye; the elastic violence and frenetic energy of the Fleischer Studio adaptations of Segar's characters and settings in their *Popeye* animated shorts; these are but a few of the tributary influences that flow forth in Superman.

This varied set of sources does not diminish the novelty and distinctness of both the foundational character, and the generic type that followed in his wake. In *Watchmen*, Alan Moore's classic reframing of twentieth-century American history in an alternative fictional universe in which the fictional Superman inspired several characters to emulate him in "real" life, one of those characters recounts his experience upon discovering *Action Comics #1*:

There was a lot of stuff in that first issue. There were detective yarns and stories about magicians whose names I can't remember, but from the moment I set eyes on it I only had eyes for the Superman story. Here was something that presented the basic morality of the pulps without all of their darkness and ambiguity. The atmosphere of the horrific and faintly sinister that hung around the Shadow was nowhere to be seen in the bright

primary colors of Superman's world, and there was no hint of the repressed sex-urge which had sometimes been apparent in the pulps, to my discomfort and embarrassment. I'd never been entirely sure what Lamont Cranston was up to with Margo Lane, but I'd bet it was nowhere near as innocent and wholesome as Clark Kent's relationship with her namesake Lois. (32)

In his novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, Michael Chabon similarly weaves the historical impact of the birth of the superhero into his fictionalized account of the comic-book industry:

The writer, Jerome Siegel, had forged, through the smelting intensity of his fanatical love and compendious knowledge of the pulps and their antecedents, a magical alloy of several previous characters and archetypes from Samson to Doc Savage, one with its own unique properties of tensility, hardness, and luster. (77)

The incredible commercial success of Superman, as the first "breakout star" of the still-fledgling format, was the impetus behind the initial phase of growth of the American comic book industry⁷; and the numerous imitations the character inspired led to the historical period of the flowering of the superhero, an era commonly designated as the Golden Age. However, the very idea of a golden age testifies to the perception during later eras of diachronic discontinuity. Indeed, it is typical of histories of the superhero to speak of two distinct periods of flourish, a golden and a silver age:

⁷ The most complete account of the interwoven histories of the superhero and the comic book industry is Gerard Jones' *Men of Tomorrow*.

The golden age was the birth of the superhero proper out of the early 1930s and was primarily associated with the DC Comics Group. Superman (1938), Batman (1939), Green Lantern (1940), and Wonder Woman (1941) are the most famous creations of this period. In the early 1960s, Marvel Comics launched a completely new line of heroes, the primary figures of the silver age: the Fantastic Four (1961), Spider-Man (1962), The Incredible Hulk (1962), the X-Men (1963), the Avengers (1963), Iron Man (1963), and Daredevil (1964). (Klock 2)

The precise delineations of these ages are of course flexible. One can argue for the “end” of the golden age simultaneously with the Second World War, the adoption of the code, or the cancellation of Superman’s (and DC Comics’) main rival in popularity during the 1940s, Fawcett’s Captain Marvel. In addition, while Klock and others argue persuasively for the primacy of Marvel Comics’ new wave as starting point of the silver age, an equal case can be made for DC’s revival of an updated version of the golden-age hero the Flash in 1956 (G. Fox 3). However, these debates are peripheral to the more important fact that a discernable break exists, marked by a wave of revised silver-age narratives that exemplify distinctive shifts in the generic contours of the superhero from earlier golden-age norms.

There are several possible reasons for this break: the end of World War II; the establishment of the Comics Code Authority; the chasm between the simplistic morality of the superhero and the growing ambiguities of a nuclear age; however, for the purposes of this study, the important factor of note is that the reintroduction, and reinvigoration, of the superhero genre in the Silver Age by the two major surviving publishing houses of

the Golden Age, National Periodicals (known more commonly as DC), and Marvel, followed two main revisionary strategies. The first involved the invention of new characters based on older, Golden Age names and models. This was the method of preference at DC; for example, the Silver Age Flash retained the name and powers of his Golden Age predecessor, but acquired a new costume, origin, and secret identity. Marvel's approach was more radical: the invention of new heroes with newer sensibilities more in touch with a readership of baby boomers whose adolescence was shaped, not by Depression and World Wars, but by television, cold wars, and nuclear anxieties. These new heroes embodied fears and vulnerabilities absent from the Golden Age paradigms: superheroes with super problems. Often these problems were adolescent in nature; indeed, another innovation was the elevation of adolescents from "teenage sidekicks" such as the Golden Age Robin, to leading protagonists, whether loners like Spiderman, or members of a team, like the Fantastic Four's Human Torch.

The superhero's capacity to undergo revision is not restricted to the paradigm shift of these Silver Age alterations; it is in fact one of the genre's most constant and characteristic qualities: "Whether the superhero finds its roots in ancient mythologies or takes shape as the quintessential commodity of the 21st century's world marketplace, it must be acknowledged that as long as the superhero has been in existence, it has been 'in the making,' working through a series of revisions" (Wandtke 5). This fluidity and adaptability allowed the superhero to survive, and even thrive, within the altered industrial landscape brought about by the code, while other popular genres faded from once-dominant levels of comic book popularity:

The biggest impact that the code has had on the content of comic books was the maintenance of the superhero comic as the dominant genre in the years following the code's adoption. The code discourages experimentation with its strict prohibitions on subject matter; as a result, the superhero comic, the staple of the industry, is reworked in endless variations that seldom pose a challenge to the code or to public perception of the medium. (Nyberg 158-159)

As previously noted, the superhero has powerful and historical associations with the comics medium and comic book format. The formal restrictions and potentials of comic book composition suited the superhero genre far more ably than the contemporaneous mass media of film and radio could:

Comic books could carry heroes beyond the limits of possibility imposed by radio (sounds without pictures and thus without depth or significant personification) and film (sounds with pictures, but constrained by technology). Radio, short on data, gave the consumer's imagination too much latitude, while film, rife with data, refused to give it enough. Comic books, however accidentally, managed to split the difference. They could show whatever the artist could draw, their lines and colors directing imagination, their balloon-held texts defining time and space. Comic book artists and writers could produce that which could be conceived, which was more than the creators of motion pictures and radio programs could claim. (Savage 7)

Despite these limitations, other media were quick to capitalize on the popularity of the new genre. From weekly radio shows and cliffhanger weekly film serials, to television and major studio film franchises, to the newer media of platform and online gaming, superhero fiction continues to be a multimedia narrative form. Each of these media involved in the production of superhero narratives adds further layers of complexity to the revisionary nature of the genre, in part due to competing economic and artistic priorities:

Nearly from his inception, Superman was recognized as a property to be sold, and selling a character to be used in other visual or narrative mediums increases the exposure and awareness of that character. However, selling a character also gives the buyer the artistic license to redesign the character...Therefore, strategic compromises are made with artists who have other visions of the superhero and how that hero might look in a new medium. Superman reached a vast new audience through the Superman radio show, Batman through the Batman television show, Spiderman through the Spiderman cartoon. In each case, none of these other versions would be easily forgotten as these other versions revised the superhero and then worked organically to revise their representations in other mediums, including comic books (Wandtke 29-30).

The history of the genre can be read as a series of moments when prior meanings attached to the superhero had to change in order to accommodate differing media, shifting readerships, industrial standards, and societal norms. Thus Superman, representative of both icon and genre, undergoes several modifications over time:

In his earliest outings, he had been a kind of super-social worker, in the comic's words, a 'Champion of the Oppressed', reflecting the liberal idealism of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal....Then, when the Cold War came to America, the character evolved into a fantasy guardian of the world order: an all-powerful, and at times slightly portly-looking conservative, fighting for 'Truth, Justice and the American Way'. Later still, he would be revamped again for more cynical times. (Sabin 61)

The polytropic multiplicity of the perpetually-revised Superman presents fascinating opportunities to explore historical changes in reader expectations, industry standards, and societal restrictions. However, equally striking is the fact that, despite his multiple textual incarnations, Superman remains recognizable as the "same" character. This facticity is in part a result of the visual dynamics of iconic representation: the familiar costume, color combinations, musculature. However, there are underlying consistencies of character and narrative that, while not fixed and immutable, at the very least provide a delimited range of possibilities beyond which the character could not properly be said to be revised, but rather transformed into something else. Thus we can properly speak of the variant versions of Superman, aware of the paradoxical interplay between identity and difference involved in such a statement. The narrative implications of this paradox will be further explored in chapter two.

Chapter Two

Continuity and Multiplicity: The Chronotope of the Superhero

Despite its enduring iconic status within popular culture, the superhero has been the subject of few academic studies. This shallow pool of material is diminished even further when one searches for substantial studies of the superhero from the perspective of either narrative or genre studies. Among these, the foundational text that approaches the superhero as constituting a distinct narrative type with its own rules and tropes remains Umberto Eco's "The Myth of Superman," and a close reading of its argument provides a critical starting point for exploring the generic characteristics of superhero fiction.

Through his analysis of the narrative patterns of Superman stories, Eco observes that two contradictory yet equally essential narratological demands permeate the superhero genre, which he terms the *mythical* and the *novelistic*:

The mythical character embodies a law, or a universal demand, and therefore must be in part *predictable* and cannot hold surprises for us: the character of a novel wants, rather, to be a man like anyone else, and what could befall him is as unforeseeable as what may happen to us. (109)

The mythic is thus characterized by the determinate nature of its story material, by the definitive fact that the stories being recounted have already been established:

“...Hercules would be seen as someone who has a story, and this story would characterize his divine features. The story has taken place and can no longer be denied” (108).

This undeniability does not preclude the possibility of creative revisions and retellings of mythic narratives, as the variations of plot, sequence and secondary characters that occur within Athenian tragedy testify. However, these differing versions were composed to be understood against the interpretive backdrop of stories that were already known. While Aeschylus and Euripides each made Orestes' myth fit their own radically different purposes, their versions of the story still were bound to a great degree by its always already having taken place. Neither playwright could alter certain central narrative facts, such as the matricide, although their presentations and interpretations of these facts could and did differ substantially; nor could they create new, subsequent plot events in the manner of novelistic narratives, since all tellings were essentially retellings of a previously-established story.

This is in contrast to the novelistic mode, which, rather than recounting the already-having-happened, narrates events that can only become known through the unfolding of the text:

The 'civilization' of the modern novel offers a story in which the reader's main interest is transferred to the unpredictable nature of *what will happen* and, therefore, to the plot invention which now holds our attention. The event has not happened *before* the story; it happens *while* it is being told, and usually even the author does not know what will take place. (109)

Superman, who for Eco functions as a paradigm for the genre, inhabits a narrative world that necessitates a blending of the two modes:

The mythological character of comic strips finds himself in this singular situation: he must be an archetype, the totality of certain collective aspirations, and therefore he must necessarily become immobilized in an emblematic and fixed nature which renders him easily recognizable (this is what happens to Superman); but, since he is marketed in the sphere of a 'romantic' production for a public that consumes 'romances', he must be subjected to a development which is typical, as we have seen, of novelistic characters. (110)

This tension between the predictability of the superhero as modern mythic archetype, and the plot twists and surprises necessary to a readership cultivated to expect a degree of novelistic uncertainty, leads to a temporal paradox characteristic of the genre. Eco describes this paradox in terms of what he calls the consumption of character:

To act, then, for Superman, as for any other character (or for each of us), means to 'consume himself....Now Superman cannot 'consume' himself, since a myth is 'inconsumable'...Superman, then, must remain 'inconsumable' and at the same time be 'consumed' according to the ways of everyday life. He possesses the characteristics of timeless myth, but is accepted only because his activities take place in our human and everyday world of time. (111)

Eco's focus on the distinctive articulations of temporality within the Superman narratives evokes Mikhail Bakhtin's category of the *chronotope*: "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in

literature” (84). While Eco does not treat of the spatial indicators of the superhero, his emphasis on temporality as distinguishing generic feature is in accord with Bakhtin’s position:

The chronotope in literature has an intrinsic *generic* significance. It can even be said that it is precisely the chronotope that defines genre and generic distinctions, for in literature the primary category in the chronotope is time. The chronotope as a formally constitutive category determines to a significant degree the image of man in literature as well.

The image of man is always intrinsically chronotopic. (Bakhtin 84-85)

Man and Superman as well, at least according to Eco.

The conflicting chronotopic demands of myth and novel culminate in a temporal anomaly characterized by Eco as “a plot which does not consume itself” (113). Within each specific self-contained story, narrative time operates according to the mode of the novel. When viewed, however, as a series of related stories, as the Saga of Superman, as it were, the narrative must provide the kind of stability characteristic of mythic time; thus, the temporal tissue connecting one story to another cannot operate according to the law of consumption:

In the sphere of a story, Superman accomplishes a given job...; at this point the story ends. In the same comic book, or in the edition the following week, a new story begins. If it took Superman up again at the point where he left off, he would have taken a step towards death. On the other hand, to begin a story without showing that another had preceded it

would manage, momentarily, to remove Superman from the law that leads from life to death through time. (114)

The resulting narrative temporality is likened by Eco to the perception of time that occurs while dreaming:

The stories develop in a kind of oneiric climate— of which the reader is not aware at all— where what has happened before and what has happened after appear extremely hazy. The narrator picks up the strand of the event again and again, as if he had forgotten to say something and wanted to add details to what had already been said (114).

Eco notes two distinctive generic narrative patterns that typify the temporal paradoxes endemic to superhero fiction. The first of these involves the manner in which superhero narratives negotiate the mythic demand that the hero's past be fixed. Superman has a fictional past seemingly as immutable as that of Hercules. He was born on Krypton; saved by his parents from his home planet's doom by being launched in a small rocket; discovered after landing on Earth by the wholesome couple Jonathan and Martha Kent, who raise him as their own; grew up to become reporter Clark Kent, whose mild-mannered *persona* serves as direct counterpart to the courage and power of Superman. However, this fixed past is much more fluid than appears at first glance. Due to the fact of ongoing textual production, Superman's fictional past is constantly in a state of potential retroactive reconstruction; textual additions made in the present emanate backwards in the character's narrative temporality, and reconstruct that temporality with

revisions that then function in future texts as if they had always already been part of the story:

It occurs, then, that along with Superman stories, Superboy stories are told, that is, stories of Superman when he was a boy, or a tiny child under the name of Superbaby. At a certain point, Supergirl appears on the scene. She is Superman's cousin, and she, too, escaped from the destruction of Krypton. All of the events concerning Superman are retold in one way or another to account for the presence of this new character...(114)

These additions to the Superman myth, although established by later texts, retroactively become part of Superman's story. Theoretically, this retroactivity is as never-ending as Superman's battle for Truth, Justice, and the American Way; as long as new Superman texts are being produced, his past is always capable of being revised.

Among fandom, the term for this type of recursive textual addition is *retroactive continuity*, or *retcon* for short. The term's first published occurrence was in the letter pages of the DC comic *All-Star Squadron #18* (Feb 1983). *All-Star Squadron*, written and edited by Roy Thomas, featured new stories about Golden Age heroes. In addressing questions concerning the relationship between, and the relative fictional status of, these contemporaneously-published stories and those composed and published during the Golden Age that featured the "same" characters, "...we like to think," Thomas replied, "that an enthusiastic ALL-STAR booster at one of Adam Malin's Creation Conventions in San Diego came up with the best name for it a few months back: 'Retroactive Continuity.' Has kind of a ring to it, don't you think?" (32)

Whereas the tactic of retroactive continuity involves composing within the fluid spaces of the narrative past, Eco's second pattern characterizes the manner in which superhero fiction can treat of a narrative future. As previously established, the disjointed temporality of the oneiric climate precludes the superhero narrative from engaging in any plot developments that involve the kind of definitive change characteristic of the novelistic mode. In order to negotiate the narrative explorations of such possibilities, a new mode of hypothetical fictionality emerges: the *Imaginary Tale*:

If Superman married Lois Lane, it would of course be another step toward his death, as it would lay down another irreversible premise; nevertheless, it is necessary to find continually new narrative stimuli and to satisfy the 'romantic' demands of the public. And so it is told "what would have happened *if* Superman had married Lois." The premise is developed in all of its dramatic implications, and at the end is the warning: Remember, this is an 'imaginary' story which in truth has not taken place. (114-115)

These stories are thus in the odd ontological position of being fictional fictions. As texts, they exist; they are read, remembered, are capable of affecting those who read them; however, they are explicitly non-canonical, and thus are not meant to be incorporated into the larger intertextual framework that is both constructed from, and serves as foundation of, each individual story.

Neither of these two narrative devices in and of themselves is unique to the superhero. Distortions of temporality similar to retroactive continuity are fundamental to an understanding of narrative theory:

...what makes Narrative unique among the text-types is its “chrono-logic,” its doubly-temporal logic. Narrative entails movement through time not only “externally” (the duration of the presentation of the novel, film, play) but also “internally” (the duration of the sequence of events that constitute the plot). The first operates in that dimension of narrative called Discourse (or *récit* or *syuzhet*), the second in that called Story (*histoire* or *fabula*).
(Chatman 9)

A commonplace illustration is the typical detective story, in which the reader encounters various characters and events in the text (*syuzhet*) as clues that must be re-sequenced and re-constituted into a logical story (*fabula*). Causality is frequently inverted in this narrative genre; what is encountered first in the text, the result of the crime, is often the final, or close to the final, sequential element of the *fabula*. The detective in these narratives functions as an inscribed model reader, piecing together disparate discoveries of various clues into a coherent story rooted in causal connections: the solution to the crime, of which the original mysterious puzzle pieces were the consequences.

The ability to create and manipulate discrepancies between the two temporalities indicated by the distinction between the time of the *syuzhet* and the time of the *fabula* is a characteristic, perhaps even essential aspect of the act of narration: “This duality not only renders possible all the temporal distortions that are commonplace in narratives... More basically, it invites us to consider that one of the functions of narrative is to invent one time scheme in terms of another time scheme” (Metz 18). In *Narrative Discourse*, a key text in the study of narrative temporality, Gérard Genette catalogues different patterns of variations between the two temporalities, which he calls *anachronies* (35). The process of

retroactive continuity can be viewed as an extended form of *analepsis*, an anachrony Genette defines as “any evocation after the fact of an event that took place earlier than the point of the story where we are at any given moment...” (40).

Similarly, texts in which multiple levels of narrative are juxtaposed in order to highlight their relative fictional status are also commonplace. Odysseus’ recounting of his previous adventures to the Phaeacian court in Books 9-12 of *The Odyssey* (which is also an example of *analepsis*); the play within the play of *Hamlet*; the narrative of the Grand Inquisitor, presented as the fictional composition of the fictional Ivan Karamazov; all are among the more famous examples of the technique of stories embedded within stories that can function to increase the reader’s awareness of multiple levels of fictionality within a given narrative.

The narrative dimension that transforms these commonplace anachronies into the temporal anomalies that Eco describes is rooted in the phenomenon defined within the discursive space of superhero fandom as *continuity*. In order to understand continuity, one must recognize the fact that most superhero narratives are doubly inscribed. On one level, they are individual stories bound by the textual conditions of their transmission. However, each individual story is also part of vast and ongoing intertextual continuums that serve as the fictional “realities” in which they take place. Douglas Wolk frames this double inscription as follows:

Contemporary superhero comics *aren’t* really meant to be read as freestanding works, even on those rare occasions when their plots are self-contained. They’re not even necessarily meant to be individual creative statements, although some of them are. Instead, superhero comics’ readers

understand each thirty-two-page pamphlet as a small element of one of two gigantic narratives, in which most major characters have thematic and metaphorical significance. (Wolk 90-91)

The majority of the most famous, and hence the most valuable, superheroes are the intellectual property of one of two major corporations: DC and Marvel. The two gigantic narratives Wolk refers to are distinguished from each other according to copyright and corporate ownership. Thus, Superman's fictional universe is composed not only of the narrative events that have "happened" to him; it is also extrapolated from texts featuring other characters sharing a common ownership. Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, and hundreds of other fictional characters "inhabit" the same narrative continuity, that of the DC Universe. However, this intertextual relationship does not extend to other characters that are the property of different corporate masters: for example, Spider-Man, Captain America, and the Fantastic Four, who, by virtue of their common ownership by DC's main competitor, are part of the fictional continuity of the Marvel Universe. These intertextualities are central to a narrative understanding of the genre, and in some ways involve a more important register of meaning than readings that attempt to interpret stories in isolation from this larger context.

In some ways, intertextual continuity is an outgrowth of the fact that a shared quality of the many media that have contributed to the superhero genre is their reliance on the dynamics of serial production and consumption. Roger Hagerdorn defines serial narratives as those characterized "through the practice of offering a narrative text to consumers in isolated, materially independent units, available at different, but predictable time; in a word, in successive episodes" (28-29). Thus, the most evident distinctions

between serial and non-serial narrative structure have to do with the negotiation of these preordained and hence predictable breaks in the presentation and consumption of texts:

While a classic text can be consumed however the consumer wishes, because he or she generally has material control over the text in its entirety before beginning to consume it, serials' mode of presentation places consumers at the whim of the medium that presents them (or, more precisely, at the whim of those who command the medium that presents serial texts). (28)

The distinctive temporal ruptures caused by a narrative whose mode of publication incorporates regular and predetermined breaks results in a great deal of emphasis on the development and maintenance of continuity. In the case of finite narratives whose means of transmission is staggered, this emphasis manifests itself in various tropes that have evolved to facilitate and stimulate audience reentry into the serial in order to ensure the return of the consumer after the break: "At the most basic level, an episode of any one particular serial functions to promote continued consumption of later episodes of the same serial, which is specifically why the cliffhanger was born" (28).

However, when considered as intertext, the superhero narrative is not finite, but rather is ongoing and potentially infinite. John Ellis' observations concerning the contrasts between cinema and television narratives are in many ways applicable to superhero narratives as well:

Cinema narration has a strong internal dynamic, a movement from an initial equilibrium that is disrupted towards a new harmony that is the end

of the fiction. Broadcast TV narration has a more dispersed narrational form: it is extensive rather than sequential. Its characteristic mode is not one of final closure or totalizing vision; rather, it offers a continuous refiguration of events. (147)

When viewed independently, each story is limited, and follows traditional conventions of linear narrative temporality; however, as long as new superhero stories are being produced, each of the two continuities is still capable of being added to and revised:

New canonical texts are being added every month. Any definite metatextual resolution is therefore indefinitely postponed. That is to say, the DC or Marvel Universe is not finally defined until some future date when superhero texts cease to be published. In the meantime, new texts must be made sense of within continuity, or discarded as non-canonical. (Reynolds 43)

Thus, in addition to the condition of double temporality which it shares in common with all narratives, the chronotope of the superhero is characterized by interplay between the two-fold narrative levels of discrete episode and serial continuity.

Eco foregrounds a narrative situation consisting of thousands of formulaic stories in which the essential qualities of time, that it is irreversible, that it consumes itself, that each action and event involves the taking of a step towards death, are implicitly denied. Thus it is that Superman will never age; he exists in a perpetual present, although he has a past that is constantly growing, some of which, at least in theory, has yet to be written.

Eco recognizes that the ambiguity at the root of the oneiric climate of the Superman narrative is closely related to the emergence of characters that appear (and reappear) in multiple texts, characters described by Eco as *inexhaustible* (120). Eco's examples include the early-twentieth-century French villain Fantomas, the epicurean detective Nero Wolfe, and their respective entourages of accompanying characters and iterative plots. In the case of these multitextual characters, *fabula* material is derived from multiple *syuzhet* sources, published in diverse media and at different times. Sherlock Holmes, for example, has a *fabula* biography, built of events gleaned from the various texts in which the character has appeared. As with Superman, later texts can provide earlier biographical details: an example is *The Musgrave Ritual*, the seventeenth short story text (as published in *The Strand*) featuring the Holmes character. The events recounted in it, however, "predate" the previous sixteen tales when viewed as a part of Holmes' fictional biography.⁸

However, the recursive capacity of later Holmes texts to provide narrative events that "happened" earlier in the character's *fabula* ended with the death of Arthur Conan Doyle, or at least with the final publication of Conan Doyle-written texts. This is a critical point to keep in mind, especially as the character has continued to appear in various narrative media up to the present day. These post-Conan Doyle texts, however, lack canonical status as *fabula* providers. The Basil Rathbone movies, produced first by Fox and later Universal Studios; Nicholas Meyer's *The Seven-Per-Cent Solution* (1976); Alan Moore's recent graphic novel *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (2001); all are texts that offer additions and revisions to the Holmes myth. However, it can be argued

⁸ For a more thorough treatment of the textual scholarship and publication history of Conan Doyle's Holmes, see Redmond, especially 51-68 and 224-225.

that they occur outside of the genuine *fabula* because of their questionable parentage: fictions once removed from the “genuine” fictional facts derived from Conan Doyle texts.

The touchstone of authenticity provided by an original author is not without its own complications. Postmodern destabilizations of the construct of authorship are manifold, and illustrate how precarious the footing is when walking here. The following excerpt from Jerome McGann gives voice to this contestation of authorial foundationalism from the perspective of textual studies:

As the very term “authority” suggests, the author is taken to be— for editorial and critical purposes— the ultimate locus of a text’s authority, and literary works are consequently viewed in the most personal and individual way. Furthermore, just as literary works are narrowly identified with an author, the identity of the author with respect to the work is critically simplified through this process of individualization. The result is that the dynamic social relations which always exist in literary production— the dialectic between the historically located individual author and the historically developing institutions of literary production— tends to become obscured in criticism. (81)

The fictional detective’s continued presence in new texts composed after the death of his original author is due to the fact that Holmes now belongs to that category defined by Will Brooker as:

...cultural icons, whose meanings long ago escaped the anchorage of whatever “original” text brought them into being, and whose identity is no

longer inseparably tied to an individual author— as, say, Tarzan, Sherlock Holmes, Hamlet, and Don Quixote are still— but exist somewhere above and between a multiplicity of varied and often contradictory incarnations, both old and recent, across a range of cultural forms from computer games to novels. (Brooker 9)

Despite this status, the sanctioning of the Conan Doyle texts as presenting the authentic Holmes, or at least the capacity for readers to view them as such, provides stability to the character's *fabula*, in much the same way that Eco's mythic narratives are stabilized by fact of their being fixed, their already-having-happened.

Unlike the characters mentioned by Brooker, Superman's identity has never been tethered to any individual author or authors. The dynamics of comic book production and the economic subservience of creator's rights to those of the publishers regarding intellectual property made such a basis for stability impossible.⁹ Superman comic book stories have been published continuously at the rate of at least once a month since 1938. They have been written and drawn by hundreds of "handlers", each adding details that have an equal claim to *fabula* status. In addition, there have been films, cartoons, radio programs, and television series that also feature the character. The resulting mass-produced, collaboratively authored, frequently conflicting and even contradictory textual material disrupts any attempts to build a coherent continuity from such a disparate multitude. Shifting for a moment from Superman to another of these inexhaustible superheroes, his inevitable counterpoint Batman, the reader with a historical perspective

⁹ Gerard Jones' *Men of Tomorrow* is the most thorough account of the early comic book industry's power imbalance between publishers and creators.

is confronted with multiple exposures of the iconic figure: the gun-carrying vigilante Batman of the late 1930s who is not averse to killing criminals rather than simply arresting them; the patriotic symbol of law and order of the 1940s; post-Code Batman tales in which a decidedly lighter interpretation takes over as the Caped Crusader encounters alien and extra-dimensional adversaries who qualify more as pests than threats, culminating in the camp Batman of the ABC television series that originally broadcast in 1966-1967; the *Noir* influence of the 1970s Batman, culminating in the current vogue Batman of Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* and the recent Christopher Nolan-directed films, in which the moral and psychological ambiguities inherent in the character are emphasized.¹⁰ Which of these is the "real" Batman? How does a reader rate these versions according to their relative ontological status as "true" fiction?

These and other questions raised by the ongoing interplay between the text of discrete episodic events and metatextual multimedia continuity renders superhero fiction somewhat problematic when one attempts to explain it by means of conventional narrative theories of temporality. However, the oneiric climate resonates far more with the temporal discontinuities of literary works that intentionally challenge and subvert the traditional relationship between story and discourse. Eco himself notes the similarities between the ruptured temporality of the superhero genre and the more experimental fictions of Joyce and Robbe-Grillet: "...a great deal of contemporary art...reflects paradoxical temporal situations, whose models, nevertheless, exist in the epistemological discussions of our times" (116).

¹⁰ Will Brooker's *Batman Unmasked* explores many of these revisions from multiple perspectives.

As a result of this lack of intentionality, Eco, perhaps under the sway of the generic revulsion so common to discussions of the superhero, goes on to dismiss the Superman narratives as artistically inferior to literary works that experiment with non-mimetic relationships between story and discourse:

But it is a fact that, in works like *Finnegans Wake* or Robbe-Grillet's *In the Labyrinth*, the breakdown of familiar temporal relations happens in a conscious manner, on the part both of the writer and of the one who derives aesthetic satisfaction from the operation {...} The adventures of Superman, however, do not have this critical intention... (116)

This echoes Jung's famous distinction between the experimental prose of Joyce, and the schizophrenic writings of his daughter Lucia:

When the psychologist pointed out schizoid elements in poems Lucia had written, Joyce, remembering Jung's comments on *Ulysses*, insisted they were anticipations of a new literature, and said his daughter was an innovator not yet understood. Jung granted that some of her portmanteau words and neologisms were remarkable, but said they were random; she and her father, he commented later, were like two people going to the bottom of a river, one falling and the other diving. (Ellmann 679)

Leaving aside the question of whether intentionality is, should, or can be a criterion for distinguishing the relative value of these two categories of texts, it is worth exploring, as Eco does not, these parallels in greater detail. Critical categories such as those systematized by Genette, Brian Richardson notes, "...do not work if applied to

many late modernist and postmodern texts, since they are predicated on distinctions that experimental writers are determined to preclude, deny, or confound...”(47). The fundamental manifestation of these preclusions, denials, and confundities is the willingness to challenge, or even reject, the *syuzhet/fabula* distinction, and thus to engage in what Richardson calls “a contestation of the opposition between story time and discourse time” (52).

This opposition can take several forms: Richardson delineates six different categories of postmodern narrative temporality. However, the literary examples he draws upon all share a common trait that distinguishes them from superhero chronotopography; when interpreted according to the *syuzhet/fabula* dichotomy, each exemplifies a finite and stable *syuzhet* that cannot or will not resolve into an equally stable or finite *fabula*. Considered as *discourse time*, the works of Joyce and Robbe-Grillet are singular and discrete. When a reader reaches the final *the* of *Finnegans Wake*, the physical boundaries of the text are at an end. One may or may not decide to proceed backwards from the unpunctuated definite article to the midsentence beginning word *riverrun*, and thereby close the ouroboric circle. However, one will not wake up the next day to find that a sequel has been written, or additional pages composed; as discourse, it is a finished product. Even if discoveries are made at a future date that challenge our sense of the text as it is now accepted, the ensuing destabilization will occur through the discovery of absconded *syuzhet*, rather than the ongoing composition of new material.

Borges, drawing upon the first of Xenon’s three paradoxes of motion, has termed this type of temporal disruption an *avatar of the tortoise* (202). The tortoise, given any kind of a head start, can never be overtaken by the swiftest of runners, Achilles, since the

pursuer must first pass through an infinite number of midpoints. Thus, the Eleatic paradox becomes emblematic of all constructs of the infinite that are based upon endless division of a finite measurement. The *syuzhet/fabula* relationship of these narratives is thus isomorphic to the relationship between the exterior and interior of the Navidad house in Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves*: the finitude of the measurable and bound masks a potentially infinite space for exploration.

The ongoing serial narrativity that is a hallmark of the superhero chronotope leads to an inverse situation: an indeterminate and unfinished *syuzhet*, delimited by the attempts at resolution and coherence characterized by the intertextual *fabula* of continuity. The irreconcilability of the ever-growing complexities of textual expansion with the demands of story and character continuity result in increasingly convoluted narrative tanglings; the superhero navigates an impossible path between the Scylla of overdetermined textual history, and the Charybdis of omnipresent demands for novelty, relevance, and change. In order to pass through, the superhero narrative has had to evolve beyond the iterative formulae that Eco observed. In order to best understand this evolution, a brief digression is required in order to expand upon the historical phase known as the Silver Age.

The Fantastic Four, generally accepted as the first completely original superhero creation of the Silver Age, represent the overture of the movement away from Eco's oneiric climate and towards more conscious and reflexive explorations of the distinctive narrative qualities of the genre. Although not as well-known outside of aficionado circles as other Marvel Comics' silver age icons Spider-Man and the X-Men, they serve as effective paradigms of a new kind of superhero, and the new narrative tropes that accrued

around them. Their original textual appearance, published in the May 1961 first issue of an eponymous periodical, contained both the first telling of the group's origin, as well as their first adventure, a battle against the Mole Man and his underground minions. The origin establishes the basics of who they are and how they came to be: Reed Richards, scientist, recruits his girlfriend, Sue Storm, her teenage brother, Johnny, and pilot Ben Grimm to prematurely commandeer the first flight to the moon. Grimm is understandably reluctant and concerned about the dangers. By simultaneously reminding him of the cold war space race and questioning his courage, Sue goads him into agreeing to pilot the spacecraft. As predicted by Grimm, the ship is bombarded by cosmic rays, forcing them to turn back unsuccessfully. Upon landing, the effects of the rays become manifest: Richards gains the ability to stretch his body as if it were elastic, much like the classic Golden Age character Plastic Man; Sue can become invisible; Johnny can burst into living flame, mirroring yet another Golden Age hero, the original Human Torch; Grimm is transformed into an orange, rock-skinned monster, resembling the horror characters that dominated the comic book industry between Golden and Silver Age superheroics. After choosing appropriate new names (Mr. Fantastic; the Invisible Girl; the Human Torch; the Thing), they make a pact to use their great powers to help mankind.

The standard narrative tropes of the genre today have been so influenced by the Fantastic Four and its fellow Silver Age paradigms that it may be difficult to see what was so radical about this first telling of the group's origin. Simply put, several elements of the story reflect a moral ambiguity far more pronounced than any found in its Golden Age predecessors. While science and technology had been a Golden Age narrative device for the acquisition of super powers (the original Flash is one of many examples), it was a

fundamentally benign force, a wonder akin to the magic that produced a Captain Marvel. With the Fantastic Four, science is unknown, dangerous, threatening: as in Hollywood science fiction and horror films of the 1950s, it is an instrument that can both produce and resolve chaos: fitting fodder for audiences raised in the early era of nuclear anxiety. This affect is recapitulated in the interrelationships within the team: Grimm's anger at Richards, evident even before the transformation, only increases with his bitterness at his now-monstrous appearance. Such open antagonism was new to the genre, as Stan Lee, writer and co-creator of the Fantastic Four, noted:

Members of superhero teams were always the best of friends, with never a cross word between them. Good guys were never sarcastic, never bitter; yet here was a team with a raving malcontent, one whose paranoia was to increase with succeeding issues. (Lee 72)

While this introduction of grey areas of morality is extremely important to the history of the superhero genre, the most important innovation of the Marvel Silver Age that relates to narrative temporality involves the great extension of plot continuity binding together serial episodes. Like soap opera characters, the Fantastic Four had ongoing personal issues that unfolded in secondary storylines that continued even when the primary story issues involving the supervillainous threat of the month were resolved. Such strengthened continuity did not eradicate the oneiric climate described by Eco, but it did add considerably to the narrative complexities that evolved to accommodate simultaneous demands upon the reader to forget and remember past story events. The 1961 textual version of the Fantastic Four's origin has been retold several times. Each subsequent textual inscription is in fact revisionary, and involves alterations to account

for the contrast between the temporal discontinuities of the narrative, and the historical changes that have occurred in the real world in the interim. Thus, by the early 1970s, the anticommunism that motivated the flight was no longer included in analeptic retellings; such Cold War attitudes were no longer appropriately heroic traits for heroes (and readers) that had lived through the 1960s. No diegetic explanations were given for this (or any other) deviation from the original version; each version is meant to supersede all previous renditions, and becomes the underpinning for the concurrent textual reality. Certain story elements remain relatively constant in all (re)tellings: the names of the four teammates; exposure to radiation resulting from space travel; fundamental tension between the Thing and Mr. Fantastic. But each version has its own textual flavor, resulting in textual deviations, ranging from the resolution of anachronisms within the storyline; to artistic and dramatic alterations based on the shifting stylistic norms of the medium and/or the artistic inclinations of the current writer, artist, and editor; to the increased quality of paper and colored ink used in the mass production of comic books. Each retelling seems an attempt to produce a new ideal text, one that is not bound by the precedence of the historical series of texts that have preceded it. This plasticity of the superhero *fabula* renders it transhistorical; each textual version of it clothes the tale with the apparel of shifting trends, changing reader demographics and expectations, historical contexts. To what extent, then, can the Fantastic Four's anticommunism be said to exist, or to ever have existed? The question can be raised another way: what is the relative role of the *textual* and *narrative* memories of the readers of serial publications with continuing characters? In my textual memory, not only does the Four's jingoistic and anachronistic patriotism remain; so too do several other discarded elements: the early

rudimentary characterizations; the Thing's lump-like exterior, soon to evolve into an almost teddy-bearish orange rock sculpture, but in 1961 still monstrous and decidedly *not* cute; the stilted dialogue ("Fool! Did you not see me in time?"). As text, these events clearly *are*; as story elements, however, their ontological status is dependent upon the decisions of the current producers of each new textual appearance of the super team, and the corporate editorial frameworks within which they are required to operate.

This perpetual state of intertextual discontinuity is one of the major catalysts of what Henry Jenkins has characterized as a paradigm shift within contemporary superhero fiction from *continuity* to *multiplicity*:

Today, comics have entered a period when principles of multiplicity are felt at least as powerfully as those of continuity. Under this new system, Readers may consume multiple versions of the same franchise, each with different conceptions of the character, different understandings of their relationships with the secondary figures, different moral perspectives, exploring different moments in their lives, and so forth. (" 'Just Men in Tights' " 20-21)

While the paradigm of continuity involves a never-ending battle to render textual inconsistencies, alternatives, and recursions into a coherent whole, multiplicity is characterized by the coexistence of divergent and, at least by the standards of continuity, incompatible *fabula*. Instead of a single, overarching continuity, several divergent, and often contradictory, continuities co-exist. This liberates new texts from engaging in the impossible task of consolidating all the disparate textual data that has accumulated

around specific characters, and instead allows for variant versions to be published that establish their own provisional and delimited intertextual continuities. Each of these establishes and operates under its own continuity; there is no longer any perceived need to have all versions of a character conform to each other in terms of logical consistency and coherence.

This is the approach of Marvel's financially successful *Ultimate* series of titles, each of which establishes a new ongoing serial sequence which provides re-imagined and updated versions of classic Marvel characters and story-events. For instance, the *Ultimate Fantastic Four* retells the familiar origin, includes many of the essential details, but transforms them into a contemporary setting, altering details to suit the composers' sense of the tastes of contemporary audiences. Thus, the four protagonists are now college-age prodigies; as befits this change, parents are introduced and generational tensions between them and their children established, making diegetically explicit the connection between acquisition of superpowers and adolescent self-discovery previously hidden in the presuppositions of the genre; anticommunism is replaced by a collaboration between corporate and government greed as the motivating factor behind the transforming experiment/accident; space exploration has been usurped in favor of inter-dimensional transportation as the scientific backdrop of said experiment (Bendis and Millar 1-24).

This approach to retelling is fundamentally different from the transformative retcons of the past. Earlier revisions involved implicit and explicit alterations to the intertextual continuity, which, although fluid and malleable, was nevertheless considered singular and encompassing. The *Ultimate Fantastic Four* involves the conscious creation of a new version not simply of certain key episodes within the previously established

continuity, but of the continuity itself. Thus, the *Ultimate Fantastic Four* functions not simply as a variant version within a continuity, but as a variant continuity, occupying the same bookshelf as the simultaneously-published ongoing serial *Fantastic Four*, as well as several self-contained mini-series that express their own takes on the familiar characters, story elements, and motifs. In addition, there are the texts derived from other media: a series of films that has currently completed two installments and three different animated television series. Each of these operates according to its own definition of what constitutes the Fantastic Four; and while there is influence and congruence between them, the imposing status of Most Real Fiction applies to none, or to all.

The *Ultimate Fantastic Four* seemingly represents the ultimate goal of revision: a neatly-shaped end product triumphing over a messy *syuzhet*, a single ideal story over a multitudinous textual history. However, this vision of revision is itself embedded in its own paradox of infinite regression. While not a Borgian avatar of the tortoise, the *Ultimate Fantastic Four* can be described in terms of another classical Greek conundrum: Plato's self-critique of his own attempted solution to the challenges of maintaining continuity in the face of diversity, the Third Man Argument of the *Parmenides*. That which purports to be the summative and inclusive idea that resolves difference into identity is in fact merely and ineluctably another member of the series of which it presents itself to be the transcendent foundation. For an ultimate text can only exist by superseding all previous ones, by nullifying the anachronisms, redundancies, and discontinuities that have pervaded the plethora of previously published texts. Despite its attempt to resolve the inconsistencies of multiple texts into a smooth *fabula* continuity,

ultimately (no pun intended), *Ultimate Fantastic Four* cannot escape its own textuality; it is just the most recent variant text in an open-ended series.

Essentially, both continuity and multiplicity recognize the textual condition as a fluid plurality of versions; however, while continuity views this condition as a problem to be solved, multiplicity sees it as an immutable fact that cannot be avoided:

The multiplicity of versions is not a condition one can wish away, for authorial, editorial, and cultural revision is in the nature of literary phenomena; nor is it merely a “corruption” to “correct” (unless the variation happens to be an obvious error, like the word obvovous earlier in this sentence). Rather, it is something to celebrate, study, and interpret.

(Bryant 4)

However, while release from the constraints of continuity would seem an obvious boon to creative expression, new limitations have emerged. Writer Grant Morrison sees a tendency to replace conformity to authenticity with a desire to produce “the definitive take”:

which tends to manifest itself as creators playing it safe by cherry-picking and re-packaging all the best and most popular elements of an already successful feature. It's a commercial strip-mining kind of approach to a given property that seems to make a lot of sense until you realize it can really only work once before you find yourself in the awful position of having to make up stuff again. (Brady)

Morrison's criticism illustrates how the loosening of the restrictions of orthodox continuity has involved the foregrounding of the status of the most famous superhero characters as corporate properties with great commercial potential, and how this foregrounding restricts the range of what is permissible. While Batman narratives, for example, are now composed that can freely choose to ignore the overdetermined and tangled influence of seventy years of continuity revisions, there remain restrictions based upon the need to protect the character's increased status as corporate money-earner. To illustrate this with a hypothetical (dare I say imaginary?) example: let us suppose that a comics creator has the desire to compose a Batman text that foregrounds subtextual elements that by portraying the character as explicitly homosexual. Under the sway of continuity, objections would be raised that such a portrayal would violate the established and canonical rendering of the character. The acceptance of multiplicity allows for such radical departures from convention, as no single story or group of stories needs to be incorporated into the framework of continuity. However, the objections to a queer Batman would now lose their veneer as purely based on the demands of story consistency, and reveal themselves to be corporate decisions that are based on a drive to protect the value of Batman as commodity.

The increasingly overt nature of corporately-driven restrictions evident in post-Continuity era superhero fiction has led to the development of a different narrative strategy: the creation of new characters that bear clear and intentional similarities to classic (and copyright-protected) characters. This allows for stories that can take advantage of the freedom from continuity while sidestepping the limits imposed by corporate interests that must protect the iconic value of their intellectual properties.

Thus, post-continuity superhero narratives tend to fall within either of two broad categories: those that involve the re-imagining and revision of a pre-existing superhero such as Batman in *The Dark Knight Returns*; and those that introduce their own analogous characters and story events, as is the case in *Watchmen*. These two works are often linked together as contemporaneous landmark texts in the history of the superhero, and each remains the *locus classicus* of its distinct generic approach. In the one case, the familiarity of the character provides readers with an implicit textual undercurrent within and against which to interpret the version at hand; in the other, there is a far greater freedom to explore controversial and potentially unpopular themes more graphically.

To return to our hypothetical situation concerning a queer Batman: while any intimations concerning Batman's sexual orientation must be either unambiguously heterosexual or very ambiguously indeterminate, one can imagine a character who is analogous to Batman for whom the range of possibilities is more expansive. This is in fact the case with Warren Ellis' *The Midnighter*, who is both an obvious "descendent" of Batman, as well as being openly homosexual (and in fact involved in an ongoing sexual relationship with an analogous counterpart of Superman, the character Apollo).¹¹

While continuity and multiplicity offer different guidelines as to what is permissible and advisable in the production of new texts, they share a common disenchantment with the historical legacy of the superhero as discontinuous intertext. The ruptures that were and are an inevitable byproduct of the superhero's medial, textual, and generic past are either selectively ignored by the provisional *fabula* of each new version,

¹¹ The *Midnighter* and *Apollo* originated in Ellis' *Stormwatch*, but are more well-known as members of the eponymous team featured in the ongoing series *The Authority*.

or else absconded by the hazy logic of oneiric temporality described by Eco. However, some contemporary superhero narratives have chosen an alternate approach, one in which discontinuities and irreconcilabilities are neither excised nor overlooked, but instead are explored and celebrated as generically unique and quintessential. These works both exemplify new strategies of revision, and are themselves meta-revisions which explore and challenge the processes which they employ. Geoff Klock has described this small but important group of narratives as *revisionary* (25); his readings draw heavily on the assertion that the model of revision they provide is best understood in terms of the diachronic misprision at the heart of Harold Bloom's theory of intertextual influence (Klock 12-14). However, the distinctive struggle of these revisionary superhero narratives to honor and respect discontinuity as creative expression resonates more directly with a different disciplinary approach concerning the complexities and ambiguities of textual revision: that of contemporary composition studies. Before the close reading of three of the most interesting examples of these revisionary narratives in chapter four, these disciplinary perspectives must be summarized and explored.

Chapter Three

The Practice of Revision in Composition Studies

Klock's introduction of Bloom's revisionary ratio reminds us that revision is a term capable of multiple uses and significations. The variety of senses conveyed by the term both in and outside of academia is so manifold that we are almost in a position to rephrase Stanley Fish's famous ambiguous question as: is there revision in this classroom? There is revision as a second look; revision as a radical departure from an earlier view; revision as conscious distortion of the past; revision as addition or amendment, or conversely, subtraction and erasure. Furthermore, there are equally diverse ways of defining the goals of revision: revision as clarification of text; as removal of corruptions in order to restore the perceived purity of an earlier version of the text; revision as establishment of continuity between seemingly-disparate elements so as to create a coherent singular text out of multiple parts.

And so the *ephebe* of what might be called *revision studies* is drawn to multiple disciplines: film studies; history; literary studies; textual scholarship; all of which offer important perspectives to place in conversation with the ideas of revision intrinsic to the superhero genre. However, these other disciplinary vantages frame revision as primarily an interpretive device, a form of backwards-engineering to aid in understanding the construction of already-existing texts. Out of the multiple ways of looking at revision, the superhero genre and composition studies share a mutual emphasis on revision as a practice that intrinsically involves the production of more text. The superhero genre's unique chronotope is both the result of and the catalyst for the continuing practice of revision as its dominant mode of composition; revision within the genre is an essential

strategy the purpose of which is the generation of new textual material, which for the superhero narrative always involves the negotiation between what has been and what will be written.

This view of revision finds its most direct disciplinary parallel within composition studies, where revision has been studied as a dynamic and essential part of the process of writing. One can argue that the awareness of revision as an essential practice in the generation of texts is central to the discipline's historical development, which, like that of the superhero, is replete with crises. Depending on when we choose to begin our story, we can even say that it was born out of the historical crisis of the introduction of literacy itself, and the accompanying ruptures in orality-based societies this introduction catalyzed. Among other contenders for defining moments, we have several competing crises to choose from: the repercussions of the Harvard writing test and resultant writing course requirements of the late 19th century; the creation of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) as a distinct professional organization in 1949; the revolutionary impact of process writing pedagogies; or the more recent "social turn" that characterizes much of the contemporary scholarship in the field. The title, *Composition Theory and Rhetoric*, is itself an extremely condensed narrative of struggles, allegiances, and mergers that belie the apparent unity that accompanies hard-earned disciplinary status. In fact, the state of crisis and anxiety is so ubiquitous that the discipline's main subject of inquiry often seems to be its own definition, what Lynn

Worsham has described as an “ongoing battle over the nature of ‘our’ work” (Worsham 102).¹²

This perpetual battle is itself a manifestation of the dilemmas of revision. The ongoing history of composition presents us with a messy text of cross-outs, marginalia, and eraser dust: faint traces of the pioneering practices, institutional struggles, and occasional jeremiads that, along with imported models of research and objectivity, mix together into the labyrinthine hypertext that forms our field. And the task of the teller of this tale is to prune this tangled growth, to turn a rain jungle into a backyard garden, to take the mind-map of a schizoid oversoul and construct a finished product of it. But what if the discontinuous text is not viewed as an obstacle to composition, but rather as an unavoidable reality, or even a legitimate goal? What if our attempts as teachers of writing to impose the discursive rules of academia are less well-meaning attempts to help our students negotiate the corridors of power than a Procrustean project to make their knowledge fit into our prefabricated notions of what knowledge ought to be? These questions cast doubts on the very nature and purpose not only of revision, but of the teaching of composition itself. The paradoxes embedded within them are the generative force behind three key moments in the history of composition when conventional wisdom concerning revision shifted: the convergence of ideas, enthusiasms, and practices associated with what Hairston famously called the process paradigm; the opposition of academic and personal writing as exemplified by the famous series of exchanges between Peter Elbow and David Bartholomae; and most recently, the detextualization of revision

¹² The evolution and impact of the Harvard writing requirements is explored by Connors and Crowley. For detailed histories of the formation of CCCC, see Heyda, Berlin, and Bartholomae; for an overview of the impact of process pedagogy, see Hairston; for the social turn, see Trimbur.

that accompanied the more reactionary tendencies of the discipline's turn away from textual production and towards what Bruce McComiskey has called "a set of heuristic questions based on the cycle of cultural production, contextual distribution, and critical consumption" (54). Before commencing an exploration of these three transitional moments regarding revision within composition studies, I propose to frame the discussion with an extra-disciplinary example that is both product and metatextual exploration of the practice of revision: T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*.

To frame *The Waste Land* as revised text leads to the immediate and crucial consideration of what we are talking about when we talk about revision. As far as *The Waste Land* is concerned, there are several legitimate and plausible meanings that could apply: revision as the revaluation of poetic predecessors, the "fragments I have shorn against my ruins" that involves the recreation of one's own literary lineage; revision as formal experimentation with the generic conventions of the long poem in English; revision as participation in the larger Modernist project of redefining the trajectories of earlier canonical versions of literary and intellectual history. However, I propose to examine another dimension of *Waste Land* revision, the evidence for which emerges only due to the specialized attention of textual scholars and the fortuitous survival and rediscovery of manuscript evidence: revision as what Catherine Haar calls "the act of making changes to a written document to make it better," (10) as revealed through the editorial role exercised by Ezra Pound during the poem's transition from draft to publication.

In reconsidering *The Waste Land* as revised text, we begin with Pound's poetic description of his role in its composition, taken from a letter to Eliot:

These are the poems of Eliot
 By the Uranian Muse begot;
 A Man their Mother was,
 A Muse their sire.

How did the printed Infancies result
 From Nuptials thus doubly difficult?

If you must needs enquire
 Know diligent Reader
 That on each Occasion

Ezra performed the Caesarean Operation.... (Carpenter 407)

Here the familiar convention of describing poetic creation as childbirth is given several new spins here. Most striking is Pound's choice of a form of childbirth assistance that evokes both surgical intrusiveness and life-threatening necessity to express his role in the production of *The Waste Land*. This figure goes beyond the influence of Pound on Eliot and other younger modernists in his role as First Citizen and Elder Statesman of Modernism as Movement: Ezra the Impresario, using his reputation and indefatigability to discover, introduce, and endorse younger artists to the public. What it uncovers, and what is resoundingly seconded by manuscript evidence, is Pound directly intervening in the textual production.

Pound's revisions to the manuscript are harsh enough to raise the neck hairs on all but the most Draconian of writing instructors. No gentle promptings, no thoughtful

responses designed to stimulate Eliot's voice and intent; instead, what we have are intrusive, fiercely evaluative, hierarchical revisions. Before Pound's ruthless participation, Eliot's famous opening line was preceded by fifty-five lines that now exist only under Pound's bold pencil lines in manuscript form; silently deferring the spotlight to *April is the cruelest month*. (Eliot 4-5)

There are several factors that mitigate against viewing Pound's revisionary approach as in any way relevant or comparable to the dilemmas of writing teachers faced with the task of framing the practice of revision to their students. First and foremost is the fact that Eliot's submission of the poem to Pound is apparently volitional. Eliot places himself willingly before Pound's red pen; and through exercising the final choice as to whether or not to accept or reject Pound's alterations, he becomes less Pound's victim than his willing collaborator. Whatever restrictions this may entail are of the same order as those regarding choices of genre, form, intended audience, and are best viewed as accepted constraints rather than external repressions.

Closely related to this is Eliot's stature at the time of *The Waste Land's* composition as an experienced and confident writer. Although there is no evidence of the emotional response of Eliot to Pound's harsh critique, one can presume that the earlier success of poems like *Prufrock* helped insulate him from any overly-detrimental blows to his sense of himself as writer. Pound is not a teacher submitting a grade, or even an editor accepting or rejecting a manuscript; rather, he is a privileged reader, chosen by Eliot precisely because Eliot values his opinions.

Contrast this situation to the typical freshman composition classroom, made up of students representing a cross-section of attitudes and expectations concerning school, writing, and the roles these may or may not play in their future endeavors. For many, if not most of them, the purpose of the composition requirement is disturbingly vague, a mystifying area of study of indeterminate content, ready to be filled with whatever anxieties and survival strategies linger from high school experiences, as well as the particular, and often seemingly arbitrary, whims and predilections of the individual instructor.

However, despite these considerations, the Pound/Eliot revisions emphasize a factor that can be overlooked in the composition classroom, wherein concerns about harsh commentary are often and correctly rooted in the potential harm that may be done to the student, whose emerging sense of herself as writer may require nurture more than discipline. Eliot's willing participation in Pound's revisionary strategy nullifies such considerations. In the case of *The Waste Land*, it is not Eliot, but the text itself, which becomes marginalized as inadequate. For whatever else we may infer from Pound's revisions, they suggest a view of the original text as in dire need of aid. Without Pound's incisions, the text cannot be considered truly born. In this context, it is vital to consider Pound's emphasis on the confusion of gender roles in the birthing of the poem: Eliot is mother of the poem, with the traditionally female muse, its father. Wayne Koestenbaum, drawing heavily on Eve Sedgwick's pioneering work, sees this as an indication of the *homosocial* nature of Pound and Eliot's collaboration, a dynamic that operates through a marginalization and castigation of perceived disorder as weakness:

Pound's symbolic act of taking up the poem, revising it, giving it value, and Eliot's symbolic act of surrendering his poem to Pound, convert the female text into an object within a homosocial economy...By giving his text to Pound, Eliot set up the paradigm for the relationship that readers and critics have established with *The Waste Land*: man to man. (136)

For the production of literature, a mother's love is too indulgent; to take the sprawling chaos of Eliot's manuscript version and make a *Waste Land* of it, Pound's hard and manly touch is required. This attitude makes of the text of *The Waste Land* a shared woman, the mutual subjugation of which becomes the means through which the collaborators define both their partnership and their power over the words on the page: Pound as Butch Cassidy; Eliot as Sundance; and *The Waste Land* as Etta Place. It also is a patient (etherized upon a table?) awaiting Pound's version of the psychoanalyst's talking cure, his harsh and masculine revisions to the original text's overindulgences, themselves the product of Eliot's mothering instincts.

In many ways, the recent history of revision in composition studies can be assessed as an attempted corrective of this approach. In her historical overview of research on revision in composition, Jill Fitzgerald notes that, prior to the pioneering work of the first generation of process theorists and pedagogues, attitudes towards revision had remained largely in place since antiquity:

Early views of revision were theoretically dry and uninteresting. Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (1984), for example, focused on finding and structuring, rather than creating, content. De-emphasis on creativity

allowed little opportunity for revision. Consequently, for Aristotle, alterations were confined to sentence-level polishing, or what today might be termed editing, and were seen as only one aspect of revision. The conception of revision as error correction lingered for many centuries. (481-482)

Among its many contributions to the teaching and practice of composition, the process movement engaged in a profound reevaluation of the idea of revision and its role in textual production. A representative example of this revision of revision can be seen in the works of Donald Murray. In “Internal Revision: A Process of Discovery,” revision is reframed as “an opportunity for discovery” (86), and contrasted with former views of rewriting as punitive, as having “an aura of failure about it” (85).

Murray goes on to juxtapose and contrast two types of revision: *external*, which he identifies with the pre-process idea of revision as error correction; and *internal*, which encompasses the new idea of revision as discovery. Liberated from its relegation to proofreading status, internal revision is acknowledged as a central component of the creative process, as an integral and inventive strategy that informs the making of meaning:

Under this term, I include everything writers do to discover and develop what they have to say, beginning with the reading of a completed first draft. They read to discover where their content, form, language, and voice have led them. They use language, structure, and information to find out what they have to say or hope to say. (91)

In analyzing Murray as representative of this new perspective, it is of special importance to note his emphasis on revision as above all else a *textual* practice. As it presupposes a work that has already begun, revision is intricately bound with the act of reading. The discovery during revision is that of the writer as reader of her own textual work in progress, a conception which involves a recognition that the writer is not always conscious of what she has written:

But to be able to understand what I consider the most important task in the revision process, we have to appreciate the fact that writers much of the time don't know what they are going to write or even possibly what they have written. Writers use language as a tool of exploration to see beyond what they know. (87)

Murray employs a trope which recurs in several other process approaches towards revision: the use of a contrasting pair of opposed terms to designate two distinct practices usually grouped together under the heading of revision. One term includes the earlier conception of revision as correction of surface error, further expanding the framing of such repair work to encompass any formal changes to the text designed for the purposes of an audience of readers:

External revision. This is what writers do to communicate what they have found they have written to another audience. It is editing and proofreading and much more. Writers now pay attention to the conventions of form and language, mechanics, and style. They read as an outsider, and it is significant that such terms as *polish* are used by professionals: they

dramatize the fact that the writer at this stage in the process may, appropriately, be concerned with external appearance. (91)

The other term expresses the newer notion of revision as source of invention and discovery. Examples include but are not limited to Bishop's *revising out* and *revising in* (13); Flower's *writer-* and *reader-centered* modes (20); Perl's *retrospective* and *projective* structuring (367-369). These pairs are not by any means identical; each deepens the insight, and offers different metaphors through which to convert the theoretical distinction into one's own composing and teaching practices. However, they are variations on a common theme: the bifurcation of revision into the related yet distinct practices of both the surface error correction that once constituted the entirety of revision, and a new, broadened idea of revision as structural and topical reformulation and development of all aspects of the composition.

Perl's contrasting terms are notable in that they emphasize another important contribution of process theory to the practice of revision: a deeper exploration and awareness of revision's complex temporal dimensions. This complexity is most frequently expressed as the *recursivity* of revision, and indeed of all modalities of the writing process, as opposed to the rigid linear sequentiality of discrete fixed stages:

In recent years, many researchers including myself have questioned the traditional notion that writing is a linear process with a strict plan-write-revise sequence. In its stead, we have advocated the idea that writing is a recursive process, that throughout the process of writing, writers return to substrands of the overall process, or subroutines (short successions of

steps that yield results on which the writer draws in taking the next set of steps); writers use these to keep the process moving forward. (Perl 364)

While Murray understood revision to be a creative force, his implicit relegation of it to the final stages of the writing process limited the temporal span of its influence on the act of composition. By emphasizing the recursive nature of writing, revision is emancipated from its sequential position as the *denouement* of, and is instead viewed as woven throughout, the writing process. This opens up the possibility for a profound broadening of the notion of revision. Instead of being viewed as that which the writer does after the rush of inspiration has faded, revision can be seen as inventive, creative and original, indeed, as an ongoing element of all components of the writing process.

The doubling of revision into the contrasting tasks of mechanical correction and thematic/structural reformulation carries within it a subtler and more absconded ambiguity. This relates to the idea of the *purpose* of revision, the answer(s) to the question: why do we revise? The radical answer offered by Murray and echoed by many process compositionists, that we revise in order to discover what we have to say, contrasts powerfully with the older idea of revision as a means of making a text conform to the conventions of correct usage. However, while the process movement largely succeeded in liberating student writers from the fear of the red pen, there are equally powerful notions of error embedded in the composition classroom that are more absconded, and the effects of which are thus more difficult to examine. Adherence to conventional notions of structure, order, logic, warrant, and selection can also be seen as means of subjugating unruly text to fit the constraints of formal and stylistic conventions.

The danger of establishing revision as the practice of imposing these constraints on student writing was recognized by Nancy Sommers. Her seminal study, “Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers,” concludes with an observation that the true value of revision lies not in its power to establish, but rather to disrupt, the reader’s sense of order and continuity: “Good writing disturbs: it creates dissonance. Students need to seek the dissonance of discovery, utilizing in their writing, as the experienced writers do, the very difference between writing and speech—the possibility of revision” (387).

That revision involves the creation, rather than the synthetic resolution, of dissonance seems counterintuitive; at the very least, it challenges the prevalent, if often more assumed than stated, belief that the purpose of revision is, as Stephen M. North observed, “making writing ‘better’ or more ‘readable’ as determined by a reader or readers” (348). Thus, two contrasting goals of revision emerge, reflecting two different perspectives regarding the purpose of teaching composition. The first of these focuses on the advocacy of writing which strives to conform to established conventions and audience expectations; the second, on writing as a means of self-discovery, wherein digressions and discontinuities often are valued as expressions of individuality and idiosyncratic meaning-making. This schism forms one of the bases for the stratification of goals represented by the conflict between *academic* and *personal* writing, which culminates in the (in)famous exchange between David Bartholomae and Peter Elbow in the pages of *College Composition and Communication* in 1995.

The Bartholomae/Elbow debates marked my first encounter with the discipline of composition theory and rhetoric outside of my own individual teaching experiences.

Revisiting them, I continue to be struck by the degree to which both positions turn upon different notions of the role of memory within the composition classroom. Neither participant focuses upon memory as cognitive faculty; the debates sidestep the cognitive research and scholarship by figures such as Linda Flower, John Hayes, Janet Emig, and Lester Faigley that by then was beginning to cede a central disciplinary role. Instead, memory figures as the influence of the past, of tradition, of preconceived notions, the various personal and collective ghosts of Hamlet's father that inhabit all sites of writing.

For Bartholomae, this influence is unavoidable. The writer can negotiate with memory, challenge it, resist it, but never ignore it. His critique of Elbow is based on the accusation that the latter's desire to create a free and open classroom is based on self-deception and ignorance:

The desire for a classroom free from the past is an expression of the desire for presence or transcendence, for a common language, free from jargon and bias, free from evasion and fear; for a language rooted in common sense rather than special sense, a language that renders (makes present) rather than explains (makes distant). It is a desire with a particularly American inflection and a particular resonance at a moment in the academy when it has become harder and harder to cast any story, let alone the story of education, in a setting that is free, Edenic or Utopian.

("Writing with Teachers" 64)

Bartholomae's arguments draw upon and contribute to several popular currents of academic thought. First, he links his critique of Elbow to the larger tendency within

academia to reject terms like *presence* and *transcendence* as vestiges of the naïve belief in a liberal humanist subject, a belief that finds strong expression in the uncritical acceptance of the idea of independent authorship: “As I am thinking through this argument, I read Peter’s work as part of a much larger project to preserve and reproduce the figure of the author, an independent, self-creative, self-expressive subjectivity” (65).

According to Bartholomae, this larger project involves a dangerous denial of the restrictive and authoritarian nature of academic learning and institutions, which actually neutralizes any possibility of resistance:

At worst, the "democratic" classroom becomes the sleight of hand we perfect in order to divert attention for the unequal distribution of power that is inherent in our positions as teachers, as figures of institutional/disciplinary authority, and inherent in the practice of writing, where one is always second, derivative, positioned, etc. (66)

This hard reality is characterized by Bartholomae in terms of *opposition* and *resistance* to what has already written, to what I would suggest be called the *textual past* of a work in progress. Bartholomae describes his ideal type of revision:

I begin by not granting the writer her "own" presence in that paper, by denying the paper's status as a record of or a route to her own thoughts and feelings. I begin instead by asking her to read her paper as a text already written by the culture, representing a certain predictable version of the family, the daughter, and the writer. I ask her to look at who speaks in the essay and who doesn't. I ask her to look at the organization of the essay to

see what it excludes. And I ask her to revise in such a way that the order of the essay is broken-to write against the grain of the discourse that has determined her account of her family. I begin by being dismissive. (“Responses” 85)

Bartholomae’s characterization of revision as dismissive of the original text echoes Pound’s *Caesarian Operations*; once again, the text under revision is portrayed as in dire need of repair; again, the figures used to describe the textual intervention are invasive, even violent: to revise in such a way that the order of the essay is *broken*. But it is important to recognize that for Bartholomae, the writing produced by freshmen in composition courses is not the only broken text in need of repair; it is composition itself, as exemplified by Elbow, that needs to be cured of its Utopian idealism. To return to the terminology employed by Koestenbaum in his reading of the Pound revisions to *The Waste Land*: Bartholomae’s stance can be viewed as an attempt within composition to justify its own tenuous status within academia by marginalizing as feminine the historical foundations of the discipline as exemplified by Elbow, and substituting in their stead the more masculine rigors of academic discipline. In this sense, the Bartholomae/Elbow debate parallels the trend within comics studies to denigrate mainstream genres such as the superhero. Both strategies are based on the desire to achieve institutional legitimacy for disciplines whose academic credentials are neither universally accepted nor respected.

For Elbow, the past often acts as an inhibiting force, as the impulse to prematurely fit one’s words into pre-ordained categories of conventionality and respectability before they have been written down. This is in part expressed through his famous distinction between the roles of the *reader* and the *writer* within the classroom:

I can't help wanting my students to have some of that uppitness of writers toward readers. I want them to be able to say, "I'm not just writing for teachers or readers, I'm writing as much for me— sometimes even more for me." I want them to fight back a bit against readers. I want them to care about their intentions and to insist that readers respect them. I try to respect those intentions and see them— and assume I often can. Yes, I'll point out where these intentions are badly realized, but if my goal is to make students feel like writers, my highest priority is to show that I've understood what they're saying. It's only my second priority to show them where I had to struggle. (77)

Revision is a textual practice wherein reading and writing converge; where the past, in its most tangible form as the already-written, is both acknowledged as unavoidable, and recognized as ephemeral. The past in question is not simply Bartholomae's notion of "the traces of power, tradition and authority present at the scene of writing" (63); it is the concrete fact of words already being on the page. However, the fact that revision is taking place means that the text in question is still considered to be in some way ongoing or unfinished, and that further writing can and will take place. As such, it is not surprising that the debates directly address this textual practice. What is perhaps less predictable is the fact that shared beliefs concerning revision provide for an area in which the contrasting approaches of Bartholomae and Elbow converge. Elbow cites revision as the appropriate place for the trust in language that he deems vital to textual production in the classroom to cede precedence to the skepticism that both he and Bartholomae agree is characteristic of academic writing: "But in my desire to help my

students experience themselves as writers I find myself in fact trying to help them trust language— not to question it— or at least not to question it for long stretches of the writing process: to hold off distrust till they revise” (78). Thus, the credulity that Elbow argues is an essential subjectivity of the student writer does not seem to extend to the practice of revision. It is at the point of revision that the micro-utopian spaces that Elbow strives to create within the writing classroom break down. This is not to say that Elbow is advocating an identical revising strategy to that articulated by Bartholomae; in fact, Elbow goes to great lengths to provide details that illustrate the ways in which his tactics of responding to student writing would not begin by being dismissive. However, there is a fundamental agreement regarding ultimate acquiescence to the standards and authority of the guiding principles of academic writing:

You {Bartholomae} argue for "academic writing as a major part of an undergraduate's training." I agree. My only reservation is to say that this training isn't feasible or desirable in a one semester first year introductory writing courses, but that it should indeed go on in later courses in the major and in other upper level courses. Nothing I've said here is an argument against academic writing— only for something in addition.

(“Responses” 87)

However, it is difficult to escape the implications that this something different is framed by Elbow as the writing that takes *prior to* revision, at which point in time the distrust that Bartholomae and Elbow seemingly agree is appropriate to academic writing can and should take over .

The Bartholomae/Elbow debates illustrate how revision is situated within the contexts of broader battles in composition. Ultimately, the revising act involves negotiating the unresolved tensions between pedagogical frameworks in which creativity is seen as originality, and those in which the creative impulse is to be harnessed to the mastery of already-established discursive conventions. The incongruities between these perspectives remain unresolved. As the element of the composing process most emblematic of these conflicting viewpoints, one might have expected the influence of the debate would have stimulated renewed disciplinary interest in the role and practice of revision. Instead of reinvigorating revision, however, the Bartholomae/Elbow debates have themselves become embroiled within a process of disciplinary revision, a move that has attempted to marginalize their influence and importance to contemporary composition studies.¹³ A powerful reason for this change in status can be located in the most recent shift concerning revision within composition, which involves further profound transformations regarding the meaning of the term.

When I took my first graduate course in 2000, the debates, and the issues articulated within them, were an accepted part of the canon of composition scholarship. Their inclusion in 1997 by Victor Villanueva in his influential compilation reader *Cross-Talk in Comp Theory* solidified this status. By the time that the second edition was released in 2003, the most conspicuous change in content involved the omission of the debates. Victor Villanueva provided an explanation for his decision in his preface to the new edition:

¹³ Mlynarczyk's reframing of the debate as relevant to contemporary issues in composition studies is a notable exception to this trend towards disciplinary forgetfulness.

It was, I recognize, an interesting discussion centering on academic discourse versus other kinds of writing. It's gone because the discussion has taken a different turn— the personal versus the academic. (xii)

What exactly has been lost in this substitution? Or, to put it another way, what has changed in the field of knowledge that comprises the discipline of composition that renders such a judgment not only possible, but reflective of a new consensus? Where has the discussion gone? What is the different turn referred to by Villanueva?

One of the articles that Villanueva cites as representative of this new turn, and that is one of the new articles with which the debates were replaced in the second edition, is Gesa Kirsch's and Joy Ritchie's "Beyond the Personal: Theorizing a Politics of Location." The authors do not explicitly refer to the debates, although their title seems a clear allusion that situates their arguments in contradistinction to the perspectives associated with Elbow. The following series of questions from their introductory remarks indicate where they, at least, situate Villanueva's different turn:

How does a politics of location inform— and change— research practices?
 How do we both affirm the importance of "location," and yet understand the limitations of our ability to locate ourselves and others? How do issues of power, gender, race, and class shape a politics of location? What ethical principles are consistent with feminist scholarship and can guide researchers? (523)

It seems that what is being located by Kirsch and Ritchie is the notorious *social turn* in composition. Bruce McComiskey defines this turn as follows:

While composition studies, I believe, has extensively explored the cognitive and social processes by which discourse is produced, the processes of distribution and consumption (and the entire cyclical process of production, distribution, and consumption) have been largely neglected. The integration of these rhetorical processes is the very function of social-process rhetorical inquiry. (54)

To attempt a detailed account and explanation of the current state of affairs in composition studies in the wake of this turn is beyond the scope of this dissertation. However, McComiskey's inclusion of the word *processes* in his description of what has already been explored by composition enacts a characteristic rhetorical strategy of this different turn: an explicit distancing away from the practices and strategies associated with process writing. For it is precisely in its muting of the importance of these strategies that much of the contemporary scholarship in composition studies agrees. Thus, the social turn embodies the familiar pattern of elevating itself through rejecting as naïve the less rigorous approaches of earlier scholarship.

At first glance, this may appear to signify the disciplinary victory of Bartholomae over Elbow. And certainly, the views expressed by Bartholomae and the language that he employs to convey them are much more consonant with this new paradigm than are those of Elbow. However, the reality is more complex. In this context, it is significant to note that, while Bartholomae's arguments are best characterized as *against* the writing philosophies of Elbow, the title of Kirsch and Ritchie's article situates itself *beyond* them. This is a far more dismissive rhetorical strategy than Bartholomae employed; it no longer

recognizes other approaches as alternatives to engage, but instead frames them as childish diversions that a mature academic discipline needs to outgrow and leave behind.

As regards the fate of revision within this new disciplinary framework, it is apparent that a significant transformation has taken place. Nancy Welch, one of the few contemporary compositionists to focus extensively on revision, writes in 1997 that:

...the actual word *revision*... doesn't appear as it did throughout the 1970s and 1980s in the research of Nancy Sommers, Lester Faigley and Stephen Witte, Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, Richard Beach, Linda Flower and John Hayes, and other compositionists who sought to understand just how and when writers revise in their texts, what revision does, and how it can be encouraged in the classroom. (*Getting Restless* 24)

When the word is still utilized, *revision* no longer designates a series of textual practices; rather, the term is frequently used to signify shifts in consciousness regarding social and institutional dynamics, and the new and revised outlooks resulting from such shifts:

“...revision of our notions of argument and authority, genre and identity, revision of the usual narrative of academic socialization” (24).

Welch situates this transformation within the context of John Trimbur's articulation of larger disciplinary shifts in attitude towards theories and practices associated with the process movement:

As composition takes “the social turn,” Trimbur writes, teachers and researchers no longer locate their interests and questions in “students' reading and writing processes,” but instead in “the cultural politics of

literacy”(p.109). With this shift, revision, understood as a late stage in a generic writing process, gets left behind, outdated as words like *prewriting* and *planning*. Any mention of such words, I’m guessing, might signal what Trimbur calls “an unwillingness to break” with 1970s process pedagogies (p.112). Ironically, however, what seems to happen in the social turn is this: Even as post-process theorists charge process pedagogy with ignoring context, erasing social differences and social forces, their own research similarly effaces specific writers and scenes of writing. (24)

In this environment, textual activities such as revision drift outside of the main concerns of the discipline, or else become redefined in ways that establish meanings less dependent on the act of writing. Joseph Harris echoes Welch’s observations regarding this state of affairs by noting that this changing view of revision “illustrates a shift in focus away from the practice of writing and toward questions about social values, subjectivities, ethics, and ideologies” (577).

A major problem with this attitude is that, in rejecting textual practices associated with process theory, there are frequently no new practices offered as viable replacements. Thus, instead of methodological changes in textual practice, there is instead a movement away from focus on the process of producing texts. Since texts are still being written within these settings, and composing practices still being employed, the result is often either an uncritical reliance on process writing activities poached from their contexts, or else an implicit reliance on pre-process practices, such as revision as error correction. The resulting situation is sadly ironic; the writing classrooms advocating the most radical ideological stances often endorse the most regressive practices. J. Hillis Miller noted the

inconsistencies of classrooms which combine critical ideological stances with traditional writing strategies:

The danger is that teachers of composition may assume that the reading chosen for the course can be liberating while the formal instruction in the rules of correct composition remains the same. This does not work. It does not work because the formal aspect of composition is even more powerful in imposing an ideology than is the thematic content of what is read. This is parallel to the way those in women's studies, minority discourse, or multiculturalism are in danger of falling into the hands of those they challenge if their language repeats in symmetrical mirror image the modes of language of the hegemonic discourse they would contest. Real change will come only through changes that go all the way down to the ground, so to speak, changes in language that challenge all that system of assumptions about language I have described. (281)

To Hillis Miller's critique, I would add Fredric Jameson's rejoinder that much of the ideological content of supposed critiques of modernist thought is itself far from liberating: "True believers can, in other words, be exceedingly intelligent, historicist and reflexive, without ceasing to be fanatics" (218).

Despite the general tendency of the field that Miller accurately portrays, a small number of compositionists have speculated on what a new kind of writing, rather than a new thematic content for a writing classroom, might look like. Ken Bruffee, the theorist who has most famously articulated the importance of collaborative learning as a central element of teaching writing, recognized the tension between two common but conflicting

roles of the writing teacher: keeper of discursive conventions and midwife for students' alternative forms. Bruffee draws upon Richard Rorty's distinction between *normal* and *abnormal discourse*, and in doing so adds a layer of meaning to the positions of Bartholomae and Elbow. Normal discourse, as Bruffee uses the phrase, seems nearly identical to Bartholomae's notion of academic writing:

Normal discourse is...discourse in the established contexts of knowledge in a field, discourse that makes effective reference to facts as defined within those contexts...Not to have mastered the normal discourse of a discipline, no matter how many facts or data one may know, is not to be knowledgeable in that discipline. Mastery of a knowledge community's normal discourse is the basic qualification for acceptance into that community. (643)

“But the discourse involved in generating knowledge cannot be normal discourse, since normal discourse maintains knowledge. It is inadequate for generating new knowledge. Knowledge-generating discourse is discourse of quite another kind. It is, to use Rorty's phrase, abnormal discourse” (647). Thus, rather than seeing the contrast to academic writing as pre-academic, Bruffee allows for the possibility of a non-academic form of writing that heralds new discursive norms.

While Bruffee acknowledges the importance of abnormal discourse to what he deems “the conversation of mankind,” he tends to view it as a temporary and subordinate corrective to stagnant elements of normal discourse, rather than as an embryonic form of a new, perhaps radically different way of writing and knowing:

We must teach practical rhetoric and critical analysis in such a way that, when necessary, students can turn to abnormal discourse in order to undermine their own and other people's reliance on the canonical conventions and vocabulary of normal discourse. We must teach the use of these tools in such a way that students *can* set them aside, if only momentarily, for the purpose of generating new knowledge, for the purpose, that is, of reconstituting knowledge communities in more satisfactory ways. (648)

This view allows Bruffee to avoid too deep an exploration of the ways in which a genuine acceptance of student writing that deviates from normal discourse would challenge many of our fundamental notions about composition classrooms and the writing produced therein.

Such alternative textual possibilities would both generate and be generated by alternate paradigms of revision, in which Bartholomae's insistence on the unavoidable struggle with the past be undertaken with the spirit of credulity and *jouissance* that informs Elbow's vision of the pre-revision stages of the writing process. The task of such a reimagining is indeed challenging; it is difficult to avoid any understanding of revision that does not presuppose an ideal product, whether this product is understood as "pre-existing" the act of composition in some way, or whether it has somehow projected forward as a type of anticipatory ideal. Additionally, it is important to recognize that what might be termed a discontinuous revisionary strategy cannot be identical with the absence of revision. Even when lack of revision is the result of conscious reflection (as in the case of certain Beat writings, for example), the strategy implicitly accepts that revision cannot

function as anything but the imposition of conventionality, and the distancing of the text from its initial creative energy.

That the text being revised is in some ways the repository of unknown or forgotten meanings is at the core of contemporary superhero fiction, for which every new act of writing involves a creative act of reading the complex intertextual history of prior compositions. Harkening back to Murray, this conceptualization of revision does not view reading and writing as antipodal, but rather as coequal and inextricably connected sources of the idea of discovery as core component of the writing process. Certain recent narratives that explore the superhero genre's negotiations with continuity and multiplicity provide at the very least conceptual frameworks for new directions through which to reinvigorate study of the practice of revision within composition studies. The dilemma common to both the superhero genre and the discipline of composition has been a deeply rooted belief that the purpose of these revisionary explorations of the already-written text is the elimination of textual discontinuities, resulting in a consistent and coherent final product. The changes brought about by the shift away from continuity to that of multiplicity in one discipline, and the social turn in the other, have left this tenet of revision largely intact and unchallenged. However, a small number of recent superhero narratives have taken advantage of the narrative freedom from continuity not by absconding the discontinuities of the superhero's textual past, but rather by exploring and seeking to understand them. This revaluation involves a transformation of the conception of revision in which it is viewed not as the practice of developing a singular definitive text, but rather as the articulation of the relationship between multiple textual versions. In

the following chapter, three of these narratives will be explored as offering new perspectives on the practice of revision.

Chapter Four

Three Narratives of Revision

The Nearness of You: Sideshadowing the Main Text

“The Nearness of You” takes place within the narrative continuity of Kurt Busiek’s ongoing series *Astro City*.¹⁴ It is the first published *Astro City* text, and introduced the series to the reading public. The story and the series are themselves examples of a broader pattern of generic revision characteristic of several post-continuity superhero narratives: the retelling and re-imagining of key figures and story-events within the tradition from the perspective of a non-super character. This revisionary strategy is itself part of a reinterpretation of the superhero as commentary upon the ideas of normalcy and the ordinary.¹⁵ In “The Nearness of You,” this reinterpretation occurs through the focalizing point of view of the character Michael Tenicek.

Michael Tenicek is increasingly haunted by vivid and realistic dreams in which he is married to and deeply in love with a girl named Miranda. The detailed familiarity of these dreams leads him to believe that she must be real, but neither his friends nor family have any recollection of her or anyone like her, and she is absent from his own conscious memory as well. The disjunction between the powerful affect of his dream-recollections and their obvious irreality lead Tenicek to conclude that he is going mad, and ultimately

¹⁴ Here and elsewhere I refer to superhero narratives as the creation of their writer. This is a controversial act, as comic books are an inherent collaborative product, and it is often difficult to ascertain the parameters of the respective roles of credited writer, artist, inker, letterer, and editor in the composition of the text. Since I am dealing with the superhero narratives in question from the perspective of story elements, I have chosen to highlight the writers as primary creator, and thus refer to the works as theirs. In the Works Cited pages, I have given full credit to the other collaborators in the textual production process.

¹⁵ In addition to *Astro City*, other works that notably utilize this trope are Busiek’s *Marvels*, and Mark Waid and Alex Ross’ *Kingdom Come*.

to the brink of attempted suicide by sleeping-pill overdose, an attempt interrupted by the appearance of the superhero known as the Hanged Man.

Like all the characters in the *Astro City* series, the Hanged Man is Busiek's creation. His role in "The Nearness of You" in fact marks his first textual appearance. His name, costume, and occult powers are drawn from Tarot: The Hanged Man is the traditional name of the twelfth of the twenty-two trump cards known as the Major Arcana. However, as representative type, he iterates the multiple aspects of all superheroes and proto-superheroes whose powers and milieus are magical in nature: from Chandu and Mandrake, through golden-age magicians such as Ibis the Invincible and Dr. Fate, up to contemporary characters like Marvel's Dr. Strange. This subtype in turn draws upon the immense celebrity status of Harry Houdini a generation before the birth of the superhero, and the influence of his popularity on narrative depictions of the extraordinary.¹⁶

Analogous creations such as the Hanged Man are a staple of post-continuity superhero fiction that follows the path of *Watchmen* by avoiding the use of preexisting characters. These new characters' status as versions seems to fall somewhere between two of Genette's five types of relationships between multiple texts, a phenomenon he calls *transtextuality* (*Palimpsests* 1): the *metatextual*, "a relationship most often labeled 'commentary'" (4); and the *hypertextual*: "...any relationship uniting a text B (which I shall call the *hypertext*) to an earlier text A (I shall, of course, call it the *hypotext*)" (5). To return to the previously-discussed example of the Midnighter: Ellis' character can be

¹⁶ This influence is one of the thematic strands of Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, in which Houdini is a hero of Josef Kavalier and a source of Kavalier and Clay's superhero creation the Escapist.

seen as both hypertextual version of, as well as metatextual commentary on, its hypotextual source Batman.

The Hanged Man reveals to Tenicek the source of his dreams. A supervillain known as the Timekeeper is constantly thwarted by various superheroes. As a result, he devises a plan, and in the formulaic fashion of the supervillain, explains himself by means of a monologue:

The **All-American!** The **Lamplighter!** The **Astronaut!** Is there no **end** to these costumed crusaders? Very well! I've spent my life mastering time—working while others mocked me as an idiotic dreamer! If these “superheroes” stand in my way, I devise a means to go back in time----and prevent them from ever being born! (180)

The attempt to rewrite time encounters the resistance of Eterneon, Lord of Time; the ensuing battle leads to a violent rupture of temporal continuity. Through the magical powers of the Hanged Man, Michael Tenicek:

...sees time and reality fragment from the violence done to it—sees the world thrown into chaos—all eras collapsing, entangling with each other—he sees heroes unmade—and worse—and he sees the last desperate battle—the victorious battle—to reweave time—to undo the damage—and to set all, once more, to rights. (182-183)

However, the restored continuity is not an exact replica of what existed prior to the Timekeeper's assault on time. One difference resulting from these temporal rendings and mendings involved a slight alteration in the events surrounding the origin of the “first”

superhero, Air Ace; this in turn had the collateral effect of erasing Miranda from existence:

She was your wife. And she never existed. The choral reconstruction was not exact. Air Ace first battled the Barnstormers on a Sunday, not a Monday...and as a result, her grandparents never met. For the most part, the new reality is a whole. But close bonds such as yours...they create a weakness in the fabric of time...one that can let through...dangerous things. But the weakness is healed by your understanding. (184)

Tenicek is offered a choice by the Hanged Man: “I cannot return her to you... that is beyond even my power. But if the pain is too much...I can allow you to forget...” (184). Tenicek chooses not to forget, and asks the Hanged Man what choice those others faced with similar situations have made: “No one forgets. No one” (185). The story concludes with Tenicek continuing to dream of his now-nonexistent wife, but no longer troubled by her indeterminate status as being.

“The Nearness of You” is a meditation on the nature and effects of revision. It is itself a reimagining of a particular type of superhero narrative, in which significant alterations to the intertextual *fabula* are introduced as an explicit part of the story, often through the publication of a limited miniseries whose main purpose is the revelation of the nature and extent of these new revisions to the continuity. An early and paradigmatic example of this pattern is *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, originally published as a twelve-issue series of comic books in 1985. The original purpose of *Crisis* was to clean up the narrative complexities of the DC universe that had evolved under the dual pressures of

ongoing publication and intertextual continuity. Within this continuity, the conceit involved the existence of several parallel Earths, each of which was inhabited by its own characters:

This multiverse was an architecture of parallel worlds that house various interpretations and alternate histories of established characters: a Superman married to Lois Lane, a Batman whose parents were never killed, a world where the superheroes of World War II fight Adolf Hitler eternally, an evil mirror image of the Justice League of America (the Crime Syndicate— Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, the Flash, and Green Lantern— become the villainous Ultra-Man, Owl-Man, Superwoman, Johnny Quick, and Power Ring). (Klock 20)

This narrative situation proved a double-edged sword for superhero creators: the multitude of characters and situations available, a precursor of multiplicity, provided a great deal of compositional latitude; however, the demands that this placed on audience made the complexities of the *fabula* daunting to new readers, or at least was perceived as such by comic book producers:

...DC Comics had Earth-One, Earth-Two, Earth-Three, Earth-B, etc.

There were superheroes on Each Earth and though old-time readers had no problem understanding DC continuity, it proved off-putting to new readers who suddenly discovered there was not one but three Supermans, Wonder Womans, Batmans, etc. (Wolfman 6)

Crisis was DC Comics' attempt to recreate the DC universe into a more continuous and cohesive whole, thus allowing for easier and quicker comprehension of the intertextual level of meaning required for an understanding of any given narrative. The diegetic explanation for this revision involved the conceit that the multiple worlds that had existed within the DC continuity for the previous two decades were themselves errors, the results of a fracturing of an initially singular continuity in an epic and ancient battle between the forces of chaos and order. In the course of the mini-series, the heroes of the multiple DC Earths team up to restore the "original" unity, a restoration that, like its analogous revision in "The Nearness of You," results in the erasure of characters from established continuity. This erasure is of a different order than that achieved by the death of a character within a story-line; after *Crisis*, characters like Supergirl and the Flash were not merely dead, but were treated within continuity as if they had never existed. Surviving characters could not remember and thus mourn them; as *fabula*, it was as if they had never been.

The failure of this attempted revision of the DC universe is partially explained by the previously-discussed Parmenidean paradox: any attempt to create a revised version that resolves the inconsistencies of prior revisions can itself never escape the fact that it too is just one more version:

The irony of *Crisis* was that its methodology, in simplifying continuity, was used to make superhero comic books all the more complex, convoluted, and rich: any attempt at simplifying continuity into something streamlined, clear, and direct... only results in another layer of continuity.

To a large degree, the changes imposed by *Crisis* did not stick, and the DC universe was left even more chaotic than before. (Klock 21)

“The Nearness of You” introduces an affective dimension to the paradox of the revised text through an exploration of the role of *memory*. For it is memory that challenges the erasure of characters and events that are a part of prior texts, but have, as a result of continuity revision, been denied *fabula* status. Memory accentuates the tension between the revised text, in which several elements of prior texts are left on the cutting-room floor; and the emotional sway of those earlier textual realities that are now denied even the ontological status of *being past*.

In some ways this indeterminacy parallels the essential paradox of memory: as memory, it is present; as *memory of* that which no longer is present, its presence is based on that which is past. Awareness of this ambiguity dates back at least as far as Aristotle:

But then, if this is the sort of thing that happens with memory, does one remember this affection, or the thing from which it was produced? For if the former, we would remember nothing absent; but if the latter, how is it that while perceiving the affection we remember the absent thing which we are not perceiving? And if it is like an imprint or drawing in us, why should the perception of this be a memory of a different thing, rather than of the affection itself? For one who is exercising his memory contemplates this affection and perceives this. How therefore will he remember what is not present? (Sorabji 50-51)

In a sense, revision inverts the Aristotelian paradox concerning memory. Whereas memory involves the indeterminate status of the lingering presence of a moment that is past, revision involves the erasure of the evidence of the past, at least in so far as made manifest in prior versions of a text, from presence. Like Pound's revisions to *The Waste Land*, such an approach not only erases the past text, but covers its tracks as well, obscuring its role in the production of the present text.

That memory should be at the thematic crux of contemporary superhero fiction is not without irony, given the ephemeral presuppositions which until recently governed both the production and consumption of most superhero narratives. Ongoing serial publication has created a situation in which prior versions cannot be erased as easily as the draft materials of traditional texts. There is no delete button to push; no crumpled pages to toss in the waste basket. Writing over the past has not resulted in a palimpsest whose bottom layers need to be carefully restored with infrared equipment. The old text is as bright as the primary colors in which it was printed: if not in mylar-sealed collectibles or archival reprint volumes, then in the memories of those readers whose passionate responses are a main reason for the continued production of new versions of the superhero.

Busiek explores the dynamics of the interplay between memory and revision through three inscribed acts of revision practiced within the diegesis of "The Nearness of You." The first of these is the Timekeeper's initial attempt to retroactively write the superhero out of existence. Rather than honoring the memory of the text being revised, the Timekeeper attempts a comprehensive break with the tradition within which he is working. This is revision as the imposition of power over the already-written texts;

following the advice of Bartholomae, it begins by being dismissive. However, Bartholomae insists that this dismissiveness is in the service of memory; it serves as a painful yet necessary counter to the misguided Utopian attempt to create a discursive space free from the past that he associates with Elbow's writings and practices. In "The Nearness of You," this aggressive revision is seen as precisely the means by which the past is subjugated to the will of the present. The undesirable textual elements are viewed as antagonists; the Timekeeper's revisionary goal is to erase every trace of them. The destruction and chaos that follows in the wake of the Timekeeper's revision illustrates both the impossibility of such an erasure, as well as the damaging results of such an attempt.

The second diegetic act of revision involves the attempted restoration of the text by the Hanged Man and other unnamed magical superheroes to its condition prior to the intervention of the Timekeeper. Far from being dismissive, this revision seemingly honors the earlier version by attempting to undo the harm that the harsher practices of the Timekeeper have inflicted. This practice views itself as corrective; the memory of the orderly continuity of the earlier version serves as the model for the reconstruction of the now-discontinuous text. However, this too involves a fundamental error: the belief that the text was ever continuous to begin with. Any accurate memory of the earlier versions of the text would include the incongruities characteristic of the superhero chronotope. Thus, the earlier text is not remembered in as much as it is idealized according to the distorting lens of nostalgia. As such, while the text that results from this restorative revision is free from the explicit and rampant chaos that resulted from the Timekeeper's

actions, it too is marked by discontinuity, as represented diegetically by the absence of Miranda.

The final act of revision that takes place in “The Nearness of You” is the Hanged Man’s restoration of Tenicek’s belief in the reality of his memory of Miranda. The Hanged Man does not undo the erasure of the second revision; the return of Miranda to the text is not an option. However, Tenicek’s refusal of the Hanged Man’s offer to make him forget Miranda is enough to establish the acceptance of her continued existence as trace. Her influence on the revised text can be acknowledged, even though her presence has been removed. This validation of the past creates a framework for revision that is not based on either the dismissal or correcting of the text; instead, revision is the multiplication of versions, in which what is marginal and disruptive in one context can become the generative impulse behind the creation of another. This conception of revision recalls Welch’s idea of revision as *sideshadowing*:

In contrast with the much more common narrative device of foreshadowing, which fixes our attention on a predetermined future, sideshadowing redirects our attention to the present moment, its multiple conflicts, its multiple possibilities... In a writing classroom, sideshadowing can multiply the stories we would tell about a draft, what its reality is, what its future might be, by calling on students to initiate, to extend, a marginal conversation with their writing. (“Sideshadowing” 366-367)

Though erased from the *fabula*, Miranda can never be erased from the memory of anyone significantly affected by the textual encounter. Instead, her indeterminate status becomes

the basis for alternative textual productions. The final words of the story illustrate Tenicek's newfound acceptance of the loss that has resulted from his experience of revision, an acceptance based on the validation of her existence as both memory and text. This validation creates a framework for revision that is based on neither the dismissal nor the correcting of the text; instead, revision is the multiplication of versions, in which what is marginal and disruptive in one context can become the generative impulse behind the creation of another: "He knew her. He knows that. In another time, another world—he knew her. And he loved her. And that makes all the difference" (Busiek 186).

Planetary: Revision as Archaeology

Warren Ellis' *Planetary* focuses on a mysterious eponymous organization that employs three super-powered operatives, Elijah Snow, Jakita Wagner, and The Drummer, to achieve its goals. These goals differ radically from the traditional motivations operative within the genre. Alan Moore describes the premise of the series as follows:

The heroes...are neither crime-fighters nor global guardians, but, by some perfect stroke of inspiration, archaeologists. People digging down beneath the surface of the world to learn its past, its secrets and its marvels. In this instance, though, the world that's under excavation is not our immediate sphere, despite the fact that it's almost as familiar. Instead, we dig into a planet that is nothing less than the accumulated landscape of almost a hundred years of fantasy, of comic books. (Moore ii)

The Planetary team's explorations of this landscape composed of the history of fictional depictions of the fantastic extend backwards into the 19th Century, as they uncover evidence of such proto-super types as Baron Frankenstein and his monster, Dracula, and Sherlock Holmes; pulp-fiction characters such as Doc Savage, the Shadow, and Tarzan; and the Golden-Age superhero triumvirate of Superman, Green Lantern, and Wonder Woman. In addition, variant generic and medial fictions of the extraordinary are encountered by the Planetary team: a Japanese island inhabited by monsters resembling the Toho film studio's pantheon headed by Godzilla; a Bond-inspired espionage agent; Hollywood science fiction films of the 1950s, particularly those featuring monstrous nuclear-triggered mutations. These narrative encounters with their own generic predecessors and parallels culminate in the discovery of the Four, recognizable analogues of the Fantastic Four, who are revealed to be the main antagonists of Planetary, and who are engaged in the active suppression of the very evidence of alternative textual traditions that the Planetary team seeks to uncover.

On one level, *Planetary* illustrates the facility with which texts operating within the conventions of the superhero genre are capable of appropriating aspects of other genres. This quality challenges conventional assumptions regarding the nature of genre: "Genre criticism takes for granted that most works fall within one and only one genre with genre mixing the exception rather than the norm" (" 'Just Men in Tights' " 17). Jenkins views this elasticity as a side effect of the superhero's historical generic dominance within its medium:

Genre emerges from the interaction between standardization and differentiation...yet these forces operate differently in a context where a

single genre dominates a medium and all other production has to define itself against, outside of, in opposition to, or alongside that prevailing genre. Here, difference is felt more powerfully *within* a genre than *between* competing genres and genre mixing is the norm. The superhero genre seems capable of absorbing and reworking all other genres. (17)

In *Planetary*, the absorbed genre is that of the detective story. Elements of the detective have been interwoven into even the earliest versions of the superhero: the shared purpose of reacting to crime in order to reestablish the stasis of justice bind the two genres. Batman in particular has assimilated elements of the classical fictional detective that to constitute key traits that ebb and flow to a greater or lesser degree of prominence depending upon the particular version of the character being considered, or perhaps, composed. In *Planetary*, however, the generic pattern most important is the already-mentioned sense in which the detective functions as inscribed reader, whose task is the blending of discrepancies and diversities into a coherent interpretation that makes sense of the mystery of the unsolved crime. The difference in *Planetary* is that the mystery is the intertextuality of the superhero, and the purpose of the inscribed reader is not the establishment of continuity, but the restoration of those lost texts that, like Miranda, are the inevitable victims of the dominance of a single vision of continuity. In this context, the role of the Four as enemies of this restoration is of critical importance.

The diegetic transformation of the Fantastic Four into villains is a counter-narrative strategy of the kind used by John Gardner in *Grendel* and Gregory Maguire in *Wicked*, in which the moral perspective of the original is inverted in the revised version. In *Planetary*, the moral ambiguity present in muted form in the original Marvel

characters' earliest versions is highlighted and reexamined. Story elements present in the early texts, such as the ambivalence of the Thing towards using his powers for good and the narrative conflation of science, anticommunism, and justice, are reinterpreted in *Planetary's* retelling of the Four's origin as explicit manifestations of American hegemony and arrogance. Artemis, the code name for the secret government project that backed the Four's moon launch in 1961 (not coincidentally, the year of the initial textual appearance of the Fantastic Four):

...was the real glory, the real front line of the cold war. The crew trained up for it, were treated like warrior kings. Because that's what made heroes back then: arrogance and righteousness and the individual American way versus the commie hivemind. (*All Over The World* 120)

This reverse valuation of the characters' moral underpinnings and motivations is an important element in Ellis' version of the Fantastic Four; in fact, the use of the genre to explore and critique American discourses and practices of power is one of the most characteristic themes of contemporary superhero fiction.¹⁷

Viewed as revision, therefore, the Four's new status as villains reflects a shift in the assessment of, rather than a radical alteration of, basic established elements of the characters' facticity; in much the same way, Odysseus' polytropic cleverness undergoes a reevaluation from heroic virtue to dangerous vice in the mythic revision practiced in

¹⁷ Among the most explicit examples are: *Watchmen*; Waid and Ross' *Kingdom Come*; Chaykin's *American Flagg*; and Ellis' *Authority* and *Black Summer*.

Sophoclean and Euripidean tragedy.¹⁸ However, in *Planetary*, this narrative role is secondary to the Four's metatextual function as representation of the general impact of silver-age revision upon the superhero genre. The very success of the silver-age paradigms introduced by the Fantastic Four have had the collateral effect of obscuring versions of the superhero genre that seem to violate these narrative parameters. Through the filtering lens of this dominant generic touchstone, earlier versions of the superhero are viewed as either preparatory drafts that will eventually culminate in the attainment of the finished product, or else dismissed as irrelevant and forgettable. The Four thus represent the attempted triumph of one narrative version over the multiplicity of ignored textual pasts and potential futures available within the superhero genre. William Leather, the "Human Torch" of *Planetary*'s Four, gives voice to this will to domination:

Remember what we four are. We were reborn in the exploding heart of the multiverse. We are optimal humans. We are explorers, scientist gods, the secret heroes of a world that doesn't deserve us..... We were given the world in 1961. We know all the things that you've struggled to uncover for decades. We **are** all those things. We **are** the secret history of the planet— for we are its secret chiefs. (133)

Both the Four's attempts to suppress and control all manifestations of the extraordinary other than themselves, as well as *Planetary*'s attempts to preserve and restore the marginalized genre forms of the past that have been lost and forgotten with the ascendancy of the Silver Age paradigm, can be seen as acts of revision. The Four fit the

¹⁸ Of particular importance are Sophocles' *Philoctetes* and Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*. I choose Odysseus as example, but the point could be equally illustrated by focusing on the contrasting readings of several characters featured in extant Greek tragedies.

already-established pattern of an inscribed revision that is dismissive of all alternatives to its own hegemony; in this respect, they fulfill the same narrative role as that of the Timekeeper in “The Nearness of You.” The difference is in the strategies of revision the two narratives offer as alternatives. Busiek creates a narrative in which the loss of memory is an unintentional aftereffect of the well-intentioned restorative revision of the heroes. Miranda’s loss is thus painful, but only threatens the hegemony of the restored continuity so long as it is forgotten. The Hanged Man’s final revision, therefore, leaves the new continuity intact; Miranda remains absent, but Michael Tenicek is able to heal due to the restoration of her to the status of *past*, rather than *non-*, memory. Her removal from the text is thus a necessary price of revision, the tragedy of which is tempered by Tenicek’s reclamation of the reality of the earlier texts of which she was a part.

Planetary frames the loss of memory represented by the revised *fabula* not as a tragic but necessary accident, but instead as a conscious and malicious program designed to limit the possibilities of generic experimentation and development. The diegetic reasoning behind this is the Four’s desire to prevent the development of any potential threats to the Four’s preeminent status as ultimate world power. However, it applies equally to the process by which a single text attempts to assert precedence over all other texts: to become the definitive source of the *fabula*. Thus, memory in *Planetary* is not so much therapeutic as it is an act of resistance. The Four represent the drive towards primacy of the kind of smooth narrative continuity typified by *Ultimate Fantastic Four*, as well as the price exacted by such a homogenizing process. This price, the loss of textual realities that accompanied the triumph of the Silver Age paradigm represented by The Four, is the price of privileging *fabula* over *syuzhet*: the triumph of story continuity

over textual reality. For the recursive eradication of predecessors renders their ontological status “merely” textual; the “real” story is supertextual, or, at least, only capable of expression in an *ultimate* text.

Except for the fact that we remember them. No amount of recursive revision of the story can completely erase reader recollections of superseded textual realities. The hegemony of the Four, and of the narrative approach that they embody, is thus opposed by memory. *Planetary* incorporates this opposition at a later point in its storyline, when the reader discovers that the Four have placed memory blocks on Elijah Snow. The result is not total amnesia, but selective retention of the past, as Randall Dowling, leader of the Four explains to the captured Snow:

So here are the rules. You submit to the placing of a sequence of blocks in your memory. Just enough to prevent you from being quite so useful. And go away. Go and hide (*Planetary Reader* 43).

The danger that Snow poses is that his memories of the superhero genre’s past are unfiltered by the recursive alterations of the most up-to-date texts. His recollections are the last remnants of the narrative trends that were either transformed by or left out of the Silver Age revolution and its dominant paradigm, embodied within the *Planetary* diegesis by the Four, and within the current artistic and commercial trends in the superhero genre by revisionary works such as *Ultimate Fantastic Four*. The multiple and divergent narrative possibilities residing in the superhero genre’s own narrative history, Elijah Snow’s unblocked memories, challenge the domination of the new tendency towards finality and consistency. Snow thus represents an alternative paradigm for dealing with revision when faced with the discontinuity of the oneiric climate; rather than viewing

irreconcilable texts as problems to be resolved, they are for him ineluctable realities that must needs be preserved.

In *Planetary*, this preservation takes an explicitly compositional form. The main tactic employed by Planetary in their struggle against the Four is not the generically ubiquitous violent showdown between heroes and villains, although *Planetary* has its share of action sequences. Instead, the victories of Planetary are achieved through the ongoing composition of a series of texts-within-the –*Planetary*-text known as the Planetary Guides, a kind of ethnographic memoir written and published annually by the centenarian Snow since the 1920s. Thus, archival preservation becomes a political act of resistance to the power of the present text to rewrite its own history.

The struggle between Planetary and the Four emphasizes the power of revision as a means of resisting hegemonic forms. The Four are driven to obscure or erase evidence of paradigms that preceded their status as dominant generic narrative, and to destroy or subjugate new manifestations of the fantastic as they arise, precisely because they perceive these alternatives as threats to their position as the definers of generic parameters. To borrow Raymond Williams' famous categories of cultural transition, the Four represent the struggle of the dominant to incorporate those aspects of residual and emergent forms that remain somewhat independent, and thus capable of generating alternative or oppositional paradigms.¹⁹ This is because such traces are among the most potent sources for generating new texts that challenge the hegemony of normative standards. Seen in this light, Bartholomae's strategy of a revision that begins by being

¹⁹ For more detailed discussion of Williams' differentiation between these three modes, see *Marxism and Literature* 121-127.

dismissive of the text is not an act of resistance to the complex forces that write through us; rather, the subjugation of the version to the devaluing critical gaze is presumptuous, and removes the text from the historical continuum within which it may prove to be the source of unpredictable alternative, or even oppositional, compositions. Instead, the Planetary team's practice of unearthing and archiving the hidden past and alternative present of the superhero genre emphasizes the revolutionary aspect of Murray's idea of revision as *discovery*: "Revision— the process of seeing what you've said to discover what you have to say— is the motivating force within most writers. They are compelled to write to see what their words tell them" (*Teach the Motivating Force of Revision* 56). The ability to see what has been said can only occur when the textual evidence remains available. In a world where the dismissal and marginalization of non-hegemonic views is the primary mode of domination, resistance is most successfully practiced through the uncritical preservation of alternatives.

The *Planetary* paradigm embraces the odd contradictions intrinsic to the genre's distinct narrative structure and history, to a tradition that has seen its implied reader transform from early adolescence to adulthood, and its historical context from the Manichean clarity of the Second World War to the ambivalence and ambiguity of millennial late capitalism. The *fabula* no longer serves as the Procrustean bed that cuts away unwanted textual history; rather, it becomes co-extensive with the texts that produced, and continue to produce, it. *Planetary* calls this new paradigm the *Snowflake*:

This is the shape of reality. A theoretical snowflake existing in 196,833 dimensional space. The Snowflake rotates. Each element of the Snowflake rotates. Each rotation describes an entirely new universe. The total number

of rotations are equal to the number of atoms making up the earth. Each rotation makes a new earth. This is the multiverse. (*All Over The World* 17)

This is the shape of the superhero narrative at this stage of its evolution. Its history is dense enough that it has become a tradition; its creators now work with an awareness of the narrative paradoxes observed by Eco, and their stories have become increasingly self-referential regarding the textual past of the genre. The choice currently before the medium is between the two approaches: linear continuity versus the Snowflake; the universe versus the multiverse; an updated version of the past versus a genuine exploration of influences both hidden and obvious; the Four versus Snow and the Planetary team; *Ultimate Fantastic Four* versus *Planetary*.

Supreme: Homodoxy versus Orthodoxy

One of the hallmarks of continuity is that it provides a model of narrative assessment based on *correctness*. Measured according to the guidelines of continuity, the goal of revision is therefore the attainment and preservation of cohesion. In addition to the introduction of new texts that attempt to reinforce cohesive continuity, the revisionist project also involves the denial of *fabulistic* status to any texts that in any ways contradict established continuity. The incompatibility of this project with the historical production, reception, and composition of the superhero genre is the generative conflict out of which Eco's oneiric climate and its correlative revising methodologies of retroactive continuity and the non-canonical imaginary stories developed.

That continuity is not a fixed and stable concept is implicitly acknowledged by Jenkins' proposed paradigm of multiplicity. However, the notion of correctness as standard still applies; in fact, it is in some ways stronger than ever. While multiple continuities currently co-exist and cannot resolve into one comprehensive set of consistent versions and interpretations, each continuity considered separately is more beholding to narrative cohesion than ever. Removed from the impossible conditions of continuity, errors can no longer be excused as the inevitable outcome of a unique generic tradition; since each new version can in effect construct its own rules as if unencumbered by the influence of prior *syuzhet*, each accompanying *fabula* can be judged according to the degree to which it is internally consistent and free from error, which in this context can be defined as internal discontinuity.

However, the advantages of composing narratives under the conditions of multiplicity have frequently come at the cost of rejecting the distinctive generic quality of the superhero: the ineluctable presence of intertextual discontinuity. While "The Nearness of You" and *Planetary* incorporate textual acknowledgement of discontinuity, they do so through constructing narrative explanations that function as metatextual commentaries on revision: in "The Nearness of You," the reminder that all fictional texts are real by virtue of the emotional impact they make upon a reader; in *Planetary*, the archival restoration of the lipstick traces of the secret history of the genre so that future revisions can derive inspiration from the vast reservoir of dormant residual generic materials by framing revision in terms of memory and forgetting. Alan Moore's *Supreme: The Story of the Year* continues this trend. However, while the previous two examples explore the dynamics of discontinuity, they ultimately frame it in terms of

conflict and resolution, or what Ellis calls magic and loss (*The Fourth Man* 75). Moore creates a text that attempts to incorporate the discontinuities of the genre into a single narrative thread. The result is a kind of palimpsest in which each layer is clearly visible, and the various incompatible versions that comprise the history of the superhero coexist in what is presumed to be the normal state of affairs.

Supreme is a character created by artist Rob Liefeld in 1992. Liefeld, a former star artist at Marvel Comics, was one of the creative forces behind Image Comics, a publishing company composed of artists and writers who left Marvel over disputes relating to the rights of creators, rather than their publishers, to profit from and exert control over their characters.²⁰ While the early Image texts were often noteworthy for their visual quality, the characters and narratives were for the most part uninspiring and derivative updates of classic Marvel and DC predecessors. Supreme was for all intents and purposes a generic offspring of Superman, filtered through the darker, more serious stylistic predilections of the 1990s.

In 1996, Alan Moore, most famous for writing the landmark superhero narrative *Watchmen*, began working on the series. Faced with the inevitable task of revision that accompanies a publicized shift in creative direction, Moore chose the innovative metatextual strategy of depicting the character Supreme as experiencing the process of his own revision. Thus, rather than the diegetic inscriptions of revision seen in Busiek and Ellis' narratives, in which different characters represent different modes of revisionary agency, *The Story of the Year* presents revision from the point of view of the text being revised.

²⁰ For an account of this critical moment in the publication history of the comic book, see Khoury.

The story begins with Supreme, suffering from loss of memory, returning to earth after the conclusion of the final storyline preceding Moore's assumption of creative control. His confusion increases dramatically upon encountering three alternative versions of himself: Sister Supreme, a black female version; Superion, a futuristic descendant; and Squeak the Supremouse, an anthropomorphic animal variant. Each of these variations on the Supreme theme represent different moments in the textual history of the superhero: attempts to redress the overwhelming generic bias towards white male representations through the introduction of women and minority characters that began in the early 1970s; heroes of future variant continuities commonly postulated in the imaginary stories that Eco described; and products of the mixing of the superhero and funny animal genres such as Mighty Mouse. These versions inform "our" Supreme that a revision is about to take place, and lead him to the sanctuary of the Supremacy, a limbo dimension where earlier superseded and parallel versions of the characters who have at one time or many populated the Supreme continuity exist after being replaced by newer revisions:

They're all there...Fat Supreme, Meka-Supreme and Grim 'Eighties Supreme. Every "What If" and kid sidekick—every Supremium delusion! Meanwhile in the crowd below are the love interests, all of the Diana Danes and Judy Jordans; all their friends, the Billy Fridays and the Lucas Tates! (*The Story of the Year* 30)

The discarded Supremes are themselves constructs of Moore's revision, and do not predate his composition of *The Story of the Year*. The textual history of Supreme extends back only to 1992; thus, the allusions that Moore incorporates into the story are

not based on an actual textual past, but are part of his conscious attempt to compose on both the episodic and the serial levels of the superhero's characteristic double inscription simultaneously. By drawing upon the textual diversity of the genre's past as source material, Moore creates a parallel intertextual continuity that treats Supreme as if the character's history were co-extensive with that of the superhero. Supreme thus functions as a focalizing lens through which Moore explores the multiple versions of the superhero, and in particular of the character to which Supreme stands as analogue, imitation, and *homage*: Superman. The newly-revised reality that Supreme explores once he leaves the Supremacy incorporates a vast number of slightly-altered elements from diverse periods within the Superman tradition: the Citadel Supreme, a variation on Superman's Fortress of Solitude; the Prism-World of Amalynth, analogue of the bottled and shrunken city of Kandor; the League of Infinity, the Supreme universe's version of the Legion of Superheroes; as well as several "remembered" experiences of encounters with arch-nemesis Darius Dax, a Lex Luthor to Supreme's Superman. Each experience of the new reality is supplemented by the filling-in of memories of earlier versions based on sixty years of superhero texts, each drawn in styles representative of the era they are meant to evoke:

Maybe I really did just pop into existence a few weeks ago, like those other Supremes said, but standing by that hole I felt something. I felt a long, peculiar life well up around me...and even if my life's a tale the Universe wrote only yesterday, it started right there, in that ditch. The memories were yellowed fragments from an illustrated children's story.

Moore blends together fragments that seemingly represent different eras and incompatible sensibilities. However, Moore does not critique or deconstruct the vestiges of earlier generic qualities as much as he reinvigorates them with their original imaginative force. An example occurs when Supreme encounters his Suprematons, robot duplicates that he created as decoys and aids. The Suprematons allude to the Superman and Superboy robots that played a part in many stories published during the 1950s and 1960s, but have been absent from continuity since. There are several plausible reasons for this shift: the decreasing reliance on storylines in which Superman's protection of his secret identity is the central plot device; changing generic and cultural attitudes towards robotics and artificial intelligence; the gradual decline of the dominant character traits of Superman as omnipotent and paternal master of his domain.

One can readily imagine a revised version of this vestigial aspect of the intertext that emphasizes nostalgia for a lost past, or else uses the robots to critique older generic presuppositions regarding sentience and agency. Instead, Moore juxtaposes a "remembered" sequence, in which the robots, who repeatedly address him as *master*, help him conceal his identity from his entourage of recurrent friends, with a "current" one in which S-1, "the only one capable of independent thought" (81), rebels against Supreme by trying to take his place. The effect of this juxtaposition is not that of the counter-narrative, whereby we see the logical implications of the naivety of the earlier treatment of the theme; nor is it one of rupture, which emphasizes the incompatibility of the two versions. The earlier depiction of Supreme's relationship with the Suprematons is not demeaned and discredited as much as it is supplemented by the new encounter. Supreme goes on to reprogram S-1, who, along with the rest of the Suprematons, continue to play

secondary roles in *The Story of the Year*. However, the deeper themes of identity and consciousness that Moore has added are not abandoned; eventually, S-1 asserts his independence by assuming a new name, Talos, and leaving Supreme to start a new life for himself.

Instead of ignoring or explaining away differences between versions, Moore has created an interplay among multiplicities in which oneiric discontinuities are highlighted and celebrated. This inclusive strategy does not result in an incoherent narrative; instead, it establishes a criterion for coherence based less on the logical consistency of character and plot than on the resonance between even the most divergent versional discrepancies. Moore's description of his work on *The Story of the Year* is relevant to this approach:

To some degree, Supreme is an archetypal big-guy superhero in a cape, who stands up as well as all the others. To some degree, that's what I wanted to do with all the characters. I want to make them archetypal. I want to give them that archetypal power that the best superheroes have...

(5)

Moore's use of the term *archetypal* prompts a reconsideration of the relationship between the superhero and the mythic. The conventional reading of the connection between the superhero and mythology focuses on the analogous relationship between iconic characters such as Superman with mythic predecessors such as Heracles and Samson. As previously discussed, Eco has already offered a *détournement* of this interpretive approach by focusing on the mythic as a narrative mode that contributes to the superhero chronotope, rather than as repository of characters and exploits of which

the superhero represents an updated version. Moore's approach to *Supreme* involves an additional sense in which the superhero can be described as mythic: the shared dilemma posed by the existence of variations within the story cycles of classical mythology and superhero continuity. Claude Lévi-Strauss justified his structuralist methodology in part because of its superior capacity to interpret myths in the face of the multiplicity of versions that often exist:

Our method thus eliminates a problem which has, so far, been one of the main obstacles to the progress of mythological studies, namely, the quest for the *true* version, or the *earlier* one. On the contrary, we define the myth as consisting of all its versions; or to put it otherwise, a myth remains the same as long as it is felt as such. (Lévi-Strauss 217)

Classicist Robin Lane Fox observed that this ability to perceive variant versions of mythic narratives as consonant with each other to be a key point of contrast between pre-Christian and Christian concepts of religion in the Greek and Roman world:

There was no pagan concept of heresy. To pagans, the Greek word *Hairesis* meant a school of thought, not a false and pernicious doctrine. ...Among pagans, the opposite of "heterodoxy" was not "orthodoxy," but "homodoxy," meaning agreement. (31)

Thus, correctness is not measured by approximating the "right" version of a story or character. Instead, versions are acceptable according to whether or not they resonate closely enough to be perceived as cognates. Thus, inconsistencies between versions of stories, such as Zeus' birthplace, or the name of Oedipus' mother/wife, were not

perceived as problematic. This is a decidedly less literal and fundamentalist approach than that of orthodoxy. The notion of orthodoxy itself becomes problematic, a vestigial remnant of an inoperative approach to textuality.

The lack of orthodoxy as standard of evaluation does not grant equality to all versions; in *The Story of the Year*, there is an implicit privileging of two Supremes: the “current” Supreme, as the most recent avatar of revision; and the silver age Supreme, ruler of the Supremacy. However, this evaluative hierarchy must be contrasted with the rigidity involved in the declaration of one version as orthodox. In the first case, the criterion of elevation is the narrative function of the new Supreme as focaliser of the story; the reader sees the multiplicity of the superhero through his incarnation as most recent version. In the second case, the status is an acknowledgement of the collective reader response to the silver age version of Superman as the dominant, default “norm” of the character. This recapitulates Ellis’ use of the Four as representative of the dominance of silver age generic parameters. However, Moore presents this not as a threat to the creative expressivity of new versions, but rather as a major, yet not exclusive, source of their inspiration. The result is a challenge to orthodoxy that celebrates the imaginative joy of the earlier superhero texts without ignoring the realities of the present, both within and without the genre:

What I’d like to do is to try and infuse this new ‘90s model type superhero with all the imaginative power of the superheroes of the previous 50 years. To give it that sort of humor and grace and see if we can come up with some composite that’s viable for the next century. (*Story of the Year* 5)

Moore here articulates a version of the central paradox at the core of the practice of revision: that in the name of improving on the already written, we do not destroy that which makes it worth the effort in the first place. *The Story of the Year*, like *Planetary* and “The Nearness of You,” are all attempts to negotiate this paradox in ways that honor the doubled nature of revision as both the caretaker of the previous text and the composer of the subsequent one.

Conclusion

Perhaps because of their unusual status as fictions that have no endings, superhero narratives have evinced a profound interest in beginnings. One of the most powerful revisionary *tropes* of the genre is the Retelling of the Origin; by returning to the commencement of the *fabula* with a fresh eye toward discovery, new narrative possibilities emerge, and the most stale characters and scenarios can be re-imagined and reinvigorated. However, there are many obstacles to the successful navigation of this process. Beginnings are often embarrassing reminders that the past was not as the present would have liked it to be. This is especially true of experiences of infatuation and enthusiasm; once the passion fades, it is all too easy for memory to diminish the former centrality and relevance of the past.

The superhero falls into that category of loves that everybody expects you to outgrow eventually. The path to adulthood usually involves the abandonment of these objects of affection; for many of us, this abandonment is accompanied by distancing ourselves from our former emotional attachments, often through derision or dismissal. And in fact, the practice of revision recapitulates this process in fractal form, as the writer struggles to overcome the tyranny of what is already on the page or screen. One strategy is to become the master of the past, to subjugate the text through the imposition of revisionary will: this is at the heart of the limited, somewhat cruel approach to revision that we have seen practiced by Pound, Bartholomae, and their fictional counterparts the Four and the Timekeeper: revision as rejection of the past; revision as dismissal. It is animated by the stance expressed in the famous condensed *bildungsroman* of St. Paul, himself the great reviser of Christianity: "When I was a child, I spake as a child, I

understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things" (I Corinthians 13:11).

The paradigms offered by Moore, and with slight variations by Ellis and Busiek, are important precisely because they testify to the possibility of another type of journey to maturity, whether of a text, a genre, an individual, or a discipline; one that is based upon revisionary practices that both affirm the previous versions of the text, while creating the discursive space within which to generate new texts. These models meet the unstated goals of a revision that acknowledges both sides of the Bartholomae/Elbow debates: a writing that accepts the inevitability of the influence of the past, while still embracing a freedom from the constraints imposed by rigid expectations.

This approach towards revision involves a reevaluation of another point of contention between Bartholomae and Elbow: the value of the utopian as a guiding principle. For Bartholomae, utopia is a derisive term, and represents the avoidance of reality that he sees as the underlying motivation behind Elbow's supposed challenge to the hegemony of academic writing:

If our goal is to make a writer aware of the forces at play in the production of knowledge, we need to highlight the classroom as a substation— as a real space, not as an idealized utopian space. There is no better way to investigate the transmission of power, tradition and authority than by asking students to do what academics do: work with the past, with key textsworking with other's terms.... struggling with the problems of quotation, citation and paraphrase.... (66)

Elbow counters with his insistence that the utopian is not the opposite of the real, but rather a goal that can be attained through the use of practices that maximizes the freedom of the student writer within the space of the classroom. One of these is the activity of *freewriting*:

So does freewriting pretend to be free? Yes and no. It is not free from the teacher's authority (until a person takes it over by choice), nor from the forces of culture and language. But it does create freedom in certain crucial ways. It frees the writer from planning, from meeting the needs of readers, and from any requirements as to what she should write about or how her writing should end up— for instance, as to topic, meaningfulness, significance, or correctness of convention. Freewriting then is a paradigm of the real and the utopian: an example of how we can use our authority as teachers in our institutional settings to create artificial spaces that can heighten discovery and learning. (*Responses* 89)

As antipodal as these viewpoints are, they share the common quality of viewing the utopian in terms of the dynamics of the classroom, and in particular the implications of institutional and professorial power. The superhero narratives discussed in chapter four raise a different possibility: the utopian as paradigm of the revised text itself. The move away from the notion of the One True Version and towards the co-existence of multiple versions within the superhero genre is similar to what Fredric Jameson sees as characteristic of recent utopian literature:

What is Utopian becomes, then, not the commitment to a specific machinery or blueprint, but rather the commitment to imagining possible

Utopias as such, in their greatest variety of forms. Utopian is no longer the invention and defense of a specific floorplan, but rather the story of all the arguments about how Utopia should be constructed in the first place. It is no longer the exhibit of an achieved Utopian construct, but rather the story of its production and of the very process of construction as such. (217)

It is not the reflexive awareness of the narrative form as construct in and of itself that Jameson is advocating; what is truly important, rather, is the celebration of multiplicity, the transition from singular textual authority to versional plurality. Jameson deems this multiplicity as essential to the survival of the utopian, both as literary genre and as political agenda, in the wake of postmodernity: "...pluralisms are the answer to repressive unities and identities of all kinds" (217).

A provisional model for a relationship between versions isomorphic to that expressed by Jameson can be found in the reexamination of another discourse frequently associated with the superhero: the philosophy of Nietzsche. Early translations and overly-simplistic interpretations of Nietzsche's infamous coinage *übermensch* influenced both the emerging concept of the superhuman, and its development into the fictional category of the superhero. However, of more relevance to the dilemmas of revision raised by versional multiplicity is Nietzsche's rejection of Hegelian dialectics as the means of conceptualizing the relationship between different forces. This critique of the dialectics is crucial to Deleuze's interpretation of Nietzschean thought:

In Nietzsche the essential relation of one force to another is never conceived of as a negative element in the essence. In its relation with the

other the force which makes itself obeyed does not deny the other or that which it is not, it affirms its own difference and enjoys this difference.

(Deleuze 9)

The possibility of an interplay of differences based upon affirmation and enjoyment, rather than dismissal and labor, is not the prerequisite of utopian revision; it is itself that utopia conceived of as the story of its own production, as the embracing of pluralities, oppositions, all the color tones and combinations that have been and can be imagined as situated between the spectral poles of expression and construction, theory and practice:

Nietzsche's "yes" is opposed to the dialectical "no"; affirmation to dialectical negation; difference to dialectical contradiction; joy, enjoyment to dialectical labour; lightness, dance, to dialectical responsibilities.

(Deleuze 9)

A practice of revision that embodies this "yes" does not deny difference by creating false equivalencies; nor does it revise by negating that which has preceded it. Instead it represents the fulfillment of the potential of multiplicity by affirming both the ineluctable past, and the untold future. In so doing, the true potential of revision as discovery is realized; the past loses its predictability, and, while it can never escape its temporality, it can become the repository of the unexpected, and the generative force behind the composition of new texts.

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