

MASKS AND MADNESS*

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Abstract: «Masks», wrote philosopher George Santayana, «are glorious things» making it possible to understand an otherwise unintelligible world including ourselves (*Soliloquies in England and Other Soliloquies*, 1922). This seems to depart from the narrower, popular understanding of masks in superhero comics, in which they project a conventionally heroic or intimidating identity while hiding another identity. But the extraordinary superhero comic book series *Watchmen* (1986-87), by writer Alan Moore and artist Dave Gibbons, illustrates Santayana's ideas on masks, which in turn support a novel interpretation of *Watchmen*. The result is a better understanding of the nature of masks and an account of how this understanding contributes, first, to avoiding egotism that issues in irrationalities (dogmatism, nihilism, self-deception) and, second, to cultivating self-knowledge and sanity.

Keywords: Masks, Madness, Sanity, Santayana, *Watchmen*.

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1. Introduction

«Masks are glorious things», wrote George Santayana in *Soliloquies in England and Other Soliloquies* (1922). They are basic to consciousness and make it possible to understand an otherwise unintelligible world including ourselves¹. Others might think the glory of masks depends on the deeds of the wearer. Indeed, the glory of masks often is associated with the adventures of comic book heroes, who come to be identified with the masks and costumes that mark the fantastical identities distinguished by their skills, strength, or superpowers.

Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's comic book about a group of masked adventurers, *Watchmen* (1986-87), «deconstruct[s] [...] costumed super-hero values [...] as part of the deconstruction of the costumes themselves»². *Watchmen* demonstrates how masks that mark identity and symbolize power can threaten sanity by bringing confusion and diminishing human life – in direct opposition to the glory of understanding. Santayana's ideas bring out this aspect of *Watchmen* because guiding his reflections on masks is a vision of sane living. Santayana thought everyone depends on masks and faces the risks they bring. Superhero masks are a special case of the many and various masks in the world, but as dramatic exaggerations they are helpful starting points for inquiry into masks and madness. Superhero stories may be not only fantastical tales of extraordinary beings but also reflections on sanity and happiness relevant to all human beings.

Watchmen, set in 1985, is an alternate history of the United States in which superheroes are real. Foregoing supernaturalism and extraterrestrials, *Watchmen* is both realistic and unmistakably a superhero story as it challenges genre conventions by considering the psychology and social consequences of superheroes³. Other works have taken similar

* Thanks to Sam Adams and Jay Record.

¹ G. Santayana, *Soliloquies in England and Later Soliloquies*, New York, Scribner's, 1922, p. 132.

² R. Reynolds, *Super Heroes. A Modern Mythology*, London, B.T. Batsford, 1992, p. 30.

³ Cfr. W. Lee, *More on Moore: An Interview with Alan Moore*, in «Telegraph Wire», 23, 1985, pp. 11-15. <https://ia800404.us.archive.org/14/items/TelegraphWire221985/Telegraph%20Wire%2023%20%281985%29.pdf> (Accessed 22 August 2019); A. Moore, D. Gibbons, and N. Gaiman, *A Portal to Another Dimension: Alan Moore, Dave*

approaches, but *Watchmen* has been singularly influential in making «the comic book [...] an accepted medium» among English-language readers⁴. It has enjoyed high sales⁵ and generated decades of scholarly commentary; it is the only comic on «Time»'s unranked list of the top 100 novels published in English between 1923 and 2005⁶. But *Watchmen* was never meant to be «the ultimate statement on super-heroes», and the aim was not genre revision but artistic and philosophical exploration: structural experimentation and consideration of «way[s] of seeing the world» and how «the relationships of people and their various desires and demands and fears [go] together to make up the substance of the world»⁷.

Sixty-five years before *Watchmen*, Santayana's idiosyncratic *Soliloquies* appeared: ten years after Santayana retired, freeing his thinking and writing from the constraints of academia; and one year before *Scepticism and Animal Faith*, the important introductory volume to his mature philosophy. Like his later work, *Soliloquies* addresses self-knowledge and sanity, themes significant in *Watchmen*.

Though one work is a collection of reflections on philosophy, art, and culture and the other an illustrated story of vigilantes in a form often associated with children and semi-literates, they are notably similar. Moore and Gibbons created their work in installments determining the course of the story as they produced each issue of the series. Santayana's book was assembled from «rambling pieces»⁸ written in England amid the uncertainty of World War I (1914–1918) and in other locations (1918–1921) and published in periodicals with no plan for a compilation. Each work was guided by thematic vision, not a predetermined outline. The creators consciously experimented with how best to inquire into and express their ideas, demonstrating ideas expressed in both works: the importance of cultivating greater awareness of change and possibility and developing skillful responses to novel circumstances.

To consider Santayana's philosophy and *Watchmen* together puts Santayana's ideas in the «vital context» of a literary work, which can bring out issues that give point to the philosophical ideas⁹. The story helps clarify questions that motivate Santayana's ideas and demonstrate their relevance beyond the time and place of their articulation. These ideas provide a distinct interpretation of *Watchmen* as a reflection on living well.

Some read *Watchmen* in terms of knowledge and interpretation asserting the work's central concern is «what do we know and how do we know it? [...] How can we know what we think we know, when what we know is predicated on symbols that cannot be “known”?»¹⁰ or the «question of what history is»¹¹. Santayana's approach addresses similar questions but does not make them primary, giving up the quest for certainty that often

Gibbons, and Neil Gaiman, in «The Comics Journal», 116, 1987, pp. 80-88. <https://www.tcj.com/a-portal-to-another-dimension-alan-moore-dave-gibbons-and-neil-gaiman/> (Accessed 22 August 2019).

⁴ L. Parkin, *Alan Moore*, Chicago, Oldcastle Books, 2009, p. 15.

⁵ According to the Grand Comics Database, the single-volume collection of *Watchmen* has been reprinted at least 24 times since its original print run in 1987 (<https://www.comics.org/issue/43793/>). The work also has been published in a number of special editions: *Watchmen: Absolute Edition* (1994), *Watchmen: Collector's Edition Slipcase Set* (2016), *Watchmen: Deluxe Edition* (2013), *Watchmen: The Annotated Edition* (2017).

⁶ J. Kelly, *Time's 100 Best Novels*, in «Time», 166, 17, 6, 2005.

⁷ G. Groth, *Big Words I: Interview with Alan Moore*, in «The Comics Journal», 138, 1990, pp. 79-81.

⁸ G. Santayana, *The Letters of George Santayana, Book Two, 1910-1920*, ed. W.G. Holzberger, Cambridge, The MIT Press, 2002, p. 298.

⁹ I. Singer, *George Santayana. Literary Philosopher*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2000, p. 15.

¹⁰ B. Dietrich, *The Human Stain: Chaos and the Rage for Order in Watchmen*, in «Extrapolation», L (2009), 1, p. 131.

¹¹ S. Carney, *The Tides of History: Alan Moore's Historiographic Vision*, in «ImageTextT», II (2006), 2. <https://imagetextjournal.com/the-tides-of-history-alan-moores-historiographic-vision/> (Accessed May 29, 2024).

produces philosophical melodrama. For him masks make possible all understanding; acknowledging this enables us to get on with living that is neither bound by convention or unhinged by irrationalism – two poles that motivate concern with knowledge and can be exacerbated by tacit assumptions that knowledge should be certainty.

Other essays consider the work politically, taking the characters as «completely caught up in ideology»¹² or «as emblematic of political ideologies»¹³. Some use moral theory to understand particular characters: Nite Owl II exemplifying virtue ethics¹⁴, Dr. Manhattan as stoic sage¹⁵. Some take a broader approach to moral themes: reading the work as a criticism of authoritarianism and of superheroes' seemingly ethical justifications of their use of power and their corruption¹⁶; or taking the primary question of the work to be whether humans are humane and responsible enough to use science and regarding the characters as personifications of science¹⁷. Another uses Nietzsche's idea of the *Übermensch* to interpret characters¹⁸.

Santayana is uniquely helpful for understanding *Watchmen* because he related his ideas in terms of masks. Santayana regarded all ideologies and moralities as masks, which can be worn well or poorly, can serve or impede science, can justify lies or indicate new possibilities. This yields interpretations of greater depth and broader relevance than reading characters as examples of moral theories, personifications of science, or measured against the idea of the *Übermensch* (Nietzsche did comment on masks, but that is not considered in the referenced essay). Moore said that he and Gibbons wanted *Watchmen* characters to have depth and reality, and «cause the reader actually to sit down and make some moral decisions. We wanted to present the reader with a variety of worldviews and some hard choices»¹⁹. Santayana's ideas make the connection with a reader's moral life since he thought each of us wears masks; no special origin story of trauma or supernatural encounter compels us to wear masks; the risks of insanity assail each of us. A mask does not mark off a freak; it is a diagnostic tool for anyone concerned with mental and spiritual health.

2. Santayana & Masks

Superhero comics first appeared in the 1930s, a decade after the publication of Santayana's *Soliloquies* and several decades after Santayana had been a cartoonist for *The Harvard Lampoon*. Santayana took up the notion of masks in the context of theatre. In ancient Greek theatre a mask (*prosopon*, literally «face») of exaggerated expression indicated different

¹² J.A. Hughes, 'Who Watches the Watchmen?': Ideology and 'Real World' Superheroes, in «The Journal of Popular Culture», XXXIX (2006), 4, p. 548.

¹³ M. Wolf-Meyer, *The World Ozymandias Made. Utopias in the Superhero Comic, Subculture, and the Conservation of Difference*, in «The Journal of Popular Culture», XXXVI (2003), 3, p. 508.

¹⁴ M.D. White, *The Virtues of Nite Owl's Potbelly*, in *Watchmen and Philosophy. A Rorschach Test*, ed. by W. Irwin and M.D. White, Hoboken NJ, Wiley, 2009, pp. 79–90.

¹⁵ A. Terjesen, *I'm Just a Puppet Who Can See the Strings: Dr. Manhattan as a Stoic Sage*, in *Watchmen and Philosophy: A Rorschach Test*, cit., pp. 137–155.

¹⁶ J.R. Loftis, *Means, Ends, and the Critique of Pure Superheroes*, in *Watchmen and Philosophy: A Rorschach Test*, cit., p. 65.

¹⁷ B. Fishbaugh, *Moore and Gibbons's Watchmen: Exact Personifications of Science*, in «Extrapolation», XXXIX (1998), 3, p. 191.

¹⁸ J. Keeping, *Superheroes and Supermen: Finding Nietzsche's Übermensch*, in *Watchmen and Philosophy: A Rorschach Test*, cit., pp. 47–62.

¹⁹ Ch. Sharrett, *Alan Moore*, in E.L. Berlatsky (ed.), *Alan Moore. Conversations*, Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 2011, p. 45.

types of tragic or comic characters. Theatre was important for Santayana's characterization of understanding: «Nature, like a theatre, offers a double object to the mind. There is in the first place the play presented, the overt spectacle, which is something specious and ideal; and then there is something material and profound lying behind and only symbolically revealed, namely, the stage, the actors, and the author»²⁰. The spectacle lies open to attention; «its sensuous and poetic essence» changes with the interests of different viewers; it «offers different beauties and different morals to every new critic»²¹. The material instrumentalities, lying behind the scenes, are «unfathomable. They are events, not ideas»; even the ideas of scientists and technicians «could never probe them to the bottom»²².

Masks are the observable aspect of natural processes, forms by which we might reflect on material existence. Masks, «like flowers, like sunsets, like melodies [...] cover for us appropriately the anatomical face of nature; and words and dogmas are other masks, behind which we, too, can venture upon the stage»²³. These appear in mind as the culmination of material processes conditioned by our constitutions and instincts and by contact with existences²⁴. Masks are a conceptual aspect of natural processes, while events of body and environment are a material aspect of those processes. Maintaining the distinction between mask and event is necessary for sanity and self-understanding.

Santayana analyzed self in terms of psyche and spirit. *Psyche* is a persisting order embodied in material substance: the self-sustaining pattern of biological functions that preserve an organism, adapting it to an environment, directing it to advantages, diverting it from dangers. Though conceived as a power, it is a poetic or mythic notion – a mask – that marks the self-preserving activities of an organism; power lies in the material of the organism. Psyche stands in contrast to another aspect of a conscious being, *spirit*, which is Santayana's term for «consciousness, attention, feeling, thought, or any word that marks the total *inner* difference between being awake or asleep, alive or dead»²⁵. Spirit arises in psyche's efforts to direct an organism through a changing environment of independent existences; it is a fruition of the interaction of a sensitive organism and its material environment²⁶. It notices the environment psyche must navigate, which may benefit psyche; but this is not spirit's natural function, and it suffers when exclusively directed or distracted by psyche's concerns. Spirit most fulfills its nature when, rising above instrumental meanings orienting psyche, it is liberated from regrets, anxieties, hopes, or fears. Still, spirit cannot be separated from psyche, on which it depends for its life and the perspective that makes it the particular spirit it is. Psyche and spirit are «realizations of the same fact»²⁷, but psyche is involved in the flux of matter, and spirit is impotent among material things. Spirit is a natural culmination of impulses in psyche. Its native function is to witness, which it does by intuiting masks.

Awareness of masks gives life the intellectual dignity of understanding and is the condition for memory, art, and happiness. This explains the glory of masks: they complete

²⁰ G. Santayana, *Soliloquies in England and Later Soliloquies*, cit., p. 126.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ Ivi, p. 128.

²⁴ This is, wrote Santayana, «no new doctrine, but is old as the hills» (G. Santayana, *Obiter Scripta. Lectures, Essays and Reviews*, ed. by J. Buchler and B. Schwartz, New York, Scribner's, 1936, p. 166).

²⁵ G. Santayana, *Realms of Being*, One-Volume edition, New York, Scribner's, 1942, p. 572.

²⁶ Ivi, p. 352; G. Santayana, *Soliloquies in England and Later Soliloquies*, cit., p. 225.

²⁷ G. Santayana, *Realms of Being*, cit., 564.

nature, which would be «blind and abortive» without them²⁸. Masks mark directions of change and give meaning to events. Masks are what Santayana called *essences*. Essences are real and infinitely various, non-material and non-existent; though they are forms, they have no power to determine that one particular form rather than another is embodied in matter. Whether an existence has one essence or another is determined by the dynamic flux of matter. So, it is deceptive to cling to masks declaring them the truth of existence, and futile to discard them to reveal a truth behind them.

Awareness of the distinction between essence and existence or mask and event is immensely important, because confusing mask and the event it stands for is the beginning of madness. This is not a distinction between the real and the unreal, but between realities to which different responses are appropriate. Masks do not distort reality; they are reality: the non-existent, perceptible aspect of an immeasurably vast reality, another aspect of which is material events independent of perception. Confusing mask and event ensures inappropriate responses to these aspects of reality. *Appreciation* is appropriate to masks; cultivating it «liberates our senses» from material concerns and celebrates consciousness²⁹. *Belief* is appropriate to events; it guides action, providing the possibility of reason in the midst of change. A careful and experienced observer who understands the nature of the double object, thought Santayana, «should see more and believe less»³⁰: be more attentive to masks (images and ideas) and more cautious in believing in the things they might stand for. Caution here means care in interpreting masks.

Interpreting masks means regarding them «as messengers, as signs for existences of which they furnish but an imperfect description, for which I am perhaps hopeful of substituting a better view»³¹. «A better view» is a refinement of initial appearances by «correcting, combining, and discounting» them, resulting in something no «less symbolic but more accurate and minute»³². Science is a refinement accomplished by using symbols to direct action in public and controlled situations, and systematically attending to results to modify symbols. The «better view» remains a mask, but one from which scientific inquiry has removed idiosyncrasy, sensuous excess, dramatic flourish from initial intuitions, yielding a more accurate symbol of dynamic relations among existences³³.

Interpreting self requires interpreting the «arrested expressions and [...] echoes of feeling» of psyche's masks³⁴, which symbolize natural processes of psyche. Santayana called interpretation of these masks «auscultation of the psyche»³⁵, indicating both the need for careful, attentive, and open awareness, and the physicality of its object. Spirit's intuition of masks remarks psyche's interactions among material existences; methods of self-interpretation are continuous with those of natural science in their concern with material existences. This means self-interpretation cannot be introspection directed at an

²⁸ G. Santayana, *Soliloquies in England and Later Soliloquies*, cit., p. 132.

²⁹ Ivi, p. 127.

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

³¹ G. Santayana, *Scepticism and Animal Faith. Introduction to a System of Philosophy*, New York, Scribner's, 1923, p. 155.

³² Ivi, p. 90.

³³ Ivi, p. 179. For more on the accuracy of science (and its relation to aesthetic life), see G. Santayana, *Some Turns of Thought in Modern Philosophy. Five Essays*, New York, Scribner's, 1933, p.12, pp. 22-23.

³⁴ G. Santayana, *Soliloquies in England and Later Soliloquies*, cit., p. 131.

³⁵ G. Santayana, *Realms of Being*, cit., p. 335.

independently existing spirit; as Krempleska observed, a study of character requires study of the material world³⁶.

Santayana noted that if interpretation of psyche lacks precision compared to other physical inquiries, it makes up for it with breadth and variety of material: Psyche's masks include «our books, our words, and our social actions», revealing the nature of psyche otherwise hidden from consciousness³⁷. *Whatever* knowledge we gain of the world reveals something of psyche

for the critic who studies [this knowledge] in order to distinguish whatever may be arbitrary in it, based on human accidents, and without any but a psychic ground. All the errors ever made about other things, if we understand their cause, enlighten us about ourselves; for the psyche is at once the spring of curiosity and the ground of refraction, selection, and distortion in our ideas³⁸.

Better inquiry into the world isolates and removes characteristic effects of psyche, and this bracketed result of interpretation of nature's masks reveals something of the nature of ourselves.

Interpreting psyche's masks does not always yield self-understanding. «One may fall under the spell of [...] self-knowledge»³⁹, risking madness. Interpreting masks that appear in a rush of natural changes, we become aware of distinctions and limits, opening a realm of ideas. This puts us in a different relation to our experience. We can express and understand it, refining it in new masks of words and concepts. To apprehend and articulate changes enables an intellectual mastery of experience, «like», wrote Santayana, «a god stilling a tempest»⁴⁰. We become aware of our limits including the limit of mortality; this awareness prompts justifications, commitments, and philosophies as means to defining an unchanging character. We fashion masks of identity, ideology, or culture. And «so long as we continue under the spell of this self-knowledge, we do not merely live but act», and act according to the roles we define and the loyalties and duties we declare⁴¹. This is the assumption of the tragic mask, the arrested expression, «half horror, half sublimity»⁴², that comes with the awareness of death.

This «spell of self-knowledge» and constraints of the tragic mask threaten understanding when we presume our ideas have tamed passions, impulses, and behaviors in ideas, transcending bodily or material life altogether. Not content to be *like* gods and understand things through ideas; we want to *be* gods, identical with unlimited and unchanging ideas. Satisfactions of material life and the glory of masks and dignity of understanding are different but there is no glory or dignity without the living body. This is a tension between psyche and spirit, which are distinct in idea but inseparable in actual living; psyche must act, risk, and live experimentally to satisfy its needs; spirit intuitively ideas without risk and with immediate satisfaction. The tension is rooted in the fact that the seemingly divine ability to master experience through ideas includes awareness of the inevitable change from life to death. When we deny the tension by imposing masks on events or rejecting masks

³⁶ K. Krempleska, *Life as Insinuation. George Santayana's Hermeneutics of Finite Life and Human Self*, New York, State University of New York Press, 2019, p. 55.

³⁷ G. Santayana, *Realms of Being*, cit., p. 335.

³⁸ Ivi, pp. 336-337.

³⁹ G. Santayana, *Soliloquies in England and Later Soliloquies*, cit., p. 133.

⁴⁰ G. Santayana, *The Life of Reason or The Phases of Human Progress. Critical Edition. Reason in Art*, ed. by M.S. Wokeck and M.A. Coleman, Cambridge, The MIT Press, 2015, p. 40.

⁴¹ G. Santayana, *Soliloquies in England and Later Soliloquies*, cit., p. 133.

⁴² *Ibidem*.

altogether, the result is divided consciousness, conflicted impulses and passions, and confused behaviors. To avoid this requires consciously preserving the tension; this is the activity of reasoning.

Reason, which Santayana conceived as a principle of harmony, does not preserve any particular passions, impulses, or behaviors; rather, it is expressed in modifying them to achieve more unified living. Reasoning itself is a passion for harmony, not denying other passions but seeking consistency and order among them. It has no absolute moral superiority over other passions, and it becomes something ridiculous and unreasonable when its ends are privileged above all others⁴³. Reasoning would cease without non-rational impulses and spontaneous reactions of the material organism: Conflicts of established and novel channels of impulsive energy give point to reason as a principle of harmony.

Rational response to inevitable change seeks new harmonies among old and new; so rational life necessarily is experimental and more precarious than spontaneous animal life. Animal life responds to change with instinctive regularity; under the spell of self-knowledge, we respond to change by denying it. Neither increases understanding or meaning. Reasoning transforms the novel and the established into new ideas and vital art⁴⁴; it adapts and conserves, making understanding possible.

Understanding remedies the madness of confusing mask and event, essence and existence. Self-understanding brings «assurance and peace in being what one is, and in becoming what one must become»⁴⁵; but it does not establish a settled definition and is not a matter of literal knowledge. It's an ongoing interpretation of masks symbolic of psychic processes and an experimental activity harmonizing impulses and habits. Sanity comes with understanding that «the infinite substance of things [is] instinct with a perpetual motion and rhythmic order which [is] its life, and that the spirit of [humans is] a spark from that universal fire»⁴⁶; in other words, understanding that consciousness is dependent on the flux of matter, we not fixed persons, and finding assurance and peace in this.

3. *Watchmen* & Masks

Masks in *Watchmen* appear to function as in other superhero comics. A mask is *synecdochic*, representing a public identity of the entire character (in *Watchmen* this extends to the class of superheroes, who often are called «masks»). A mask is *protective*, concealing an identity and enabling one to elude enemies. These carry a risk of madness through confusing mask and human being, obstructing self-understanding. The *synecdochic* mask may take over the self as the identity represented by the mask dominates the living person and denies change. The *protective* mask may isolate the self, sustaining a delusion of secure independence and limiting growth. Each *Watchmen* character displays a different understanding of masks and a different way of denying or dealing with inevitable change.

⁴³ G. Santayana, *Soliloquies in England and Later Soliloquies*, cit., p. 138.

⁴⁴ See also G. Santayana, *The Life of Reason or The Phases of Human Progress. Critical Edition. Introduction and Reason in Common Sense*, ed. by M.S Wokeck and M.A. Coleman, Cambridge, The MIT Press, 2011, pp. 2-4, pp. 28-29; Id., *The Life of Reason or The Phases of Human Progress. Critical Edition. Reason in Religion*, ed. by M.S Wokeck and M.A. Coleman, Cambridge, The MIT Press, 2014, p. 6; *The Life of Reason or The Phases of Human Progress. Critical Edition. Reason in Science*, ed. by M.S Wokeck and M.A. Coleman, Cambridge, The MIT Press, 2016, p. 35; Id., *Soliloquies in England and Later Soliloquies*, cit., pp. 136-7; Id., *The Philosophy of George Santayana*, La Salle, Open Court, 1951, p. 14.

⁴⁵ G. Santayana, *Dialogues in Limbo*, New York, Scribner's, 1948, p. 40.

⁴⁶ G. Santayana, *Soliloquies in England and Later Soliloquies*, cit., p. 212.

In *Watchmen*, the first masked vigilante appeared in 1938 followed by several more who united the next year to form the Minutemen. After their initial popularity declined, and members retired or died, the group disbanded by the end of the 1940s. Yet new masks appeared; their attempt to form a group in 1966 failed, and they worked individually or in small, informal teams. By the next decade they mostly were feared and reviled and then outlawed in 1977 except for two employed by the U.S. government.

The six main characters of *Watchmen* with one exception, are of this second-generation. Each corresponds to an aspect of Santayana's ideas about masks, demonstrating not Santayana's influence but the reasonableness of the shared interpretation of human experience and the self. Listed in order of first costumed appearance: *Rorschach* exemplifies what Santayana called the tragic mask; *The Comedian* exemplifies the comic mask; *Dr. Manhattan* and *Ozymandias* exemplify different ways of denying or rejecting masks; and *Nite Owl II* and *Silk Spectre II* exemplify different ways of living sanely with masks. Only Manhattan has superpowers; the others have extraordinary strength and agility, training in combat or weapons, and high intelligence.

The story begins in 1985 with the defenestration of the Comedian. Rorschach, suspecting a «mask killer», tries to warn the others. Ozymandias, Nite Owl II, and Silk Spectre II are skeptical. Dr. Manhattan, after a journalist interrogates him on TV, leaves earth for Mars. Rorschach is framed for murder and imprisoned. Nite Owl II and Silk Spectre II free him. Manhattan takes Silk Spectre II, his former intimate partner, to Mars, tells her he knows she left him for Nite Owl II, and declares his indifference to humanity. Nite Owl II and Rorschach figure out Ozymandias is behind the Comedian's death, Manhattan's disappearance, and Rorschach's capture; and they head to Ozymandias's Antarctic headquarters. Manhattan regains some concern for humanity, figures out the plot, and transports Silk Spectre II and himself to Ozymandias's headquarters. Ozymandias stages what appears to be an inter-dimensional alien attack that kills millions of people, revealing this to the others after it happens. Rorschach leaves to expose the plot. Manhattan kills him. The surviving masks agree not to reveal Ozymandias's deception, which has brought peace as rival superpowers now work together against a perceived common enemy; the truth would revive hostilities and even more people would die.

4. The Tragic Mask

Born in 1940, Walter Joseph Kovacs grew up poor and abused, his single mother hitting him and calling him ugly. After injuring two older boys who threatened him, he entered a juvenile institution at 11, where he excelled in academics, boxing, and gymnastics. He did not lament his mother's murder five years later. As a young adult, he worked in a garment factory. When a woman rejected a custom dress as ugly, Kovacs saved the fabric made of viscous fluids between latex that produced shifting black-and-white patterns in response to temperature and pressure. «Black and white not mixing [...] no gray. Very, very beautiful» (VI, 10)⁴⁷. Two years later, the woman – Kitty Genovese – was murdered, reportedly as neighbors looked on and ignored her cries. Kovacs concluded that people essentially are selfish and cruel, denying it even to themselves. Then he took the «unwanted dress and made a face that I could bear to look at in the mirror» (VI, 10). He wore the Rorschach

⁴⁷ A. Moore, D. Gibbons, *Watchmen*, New York, DC Comics, 1987. Cited as [book number as Roman numeral], [page number as Arabic numeral].

mask with a hat and overcoat, fighting street gangs and organized crime; he joined Nite Owl II the next year. Later he realized allowing criminals to live made him too soft, only «a man in a costume» pretending to be Rorschach (VI, 15). His realization came in 1975 when he discovered a kidnapper had murdered a six-year-old girl and fed her to his dogs. After he killed the dogs, bound the kidnapper, and set fire to the house, he felt cleansed of illusion, convinced there was no god and no order to existence except what humans impose on it. He became Rorschach.

The shifting mask expresses the instability of Rorschach's childhood; it imposes black-and-white clarity on uncertainty baffling to a child; and it symbolically subdues – by containing within its shape – the volatile emotions resulting from the cruelty and betrayal he suffered. This tragic mask defines Rorschach's role as strong, independent, and righteous: it stands for the limits of what he allows, the certainty of the life he will live – without compromise – and the death he will deal to enemies. With this he is under the spell of self-knowledge that compels him to reject weakness and inconsistency, to live unbowed before anyone, and to impose moral law on a corrupt world. One author wrote, «Rorschach acts out of a completely introverted vision of Law (seeing little but himself, his own definitions, and acting on them)»⁴⁸.

But actually, Rorschach sees little of himself: only the fixed traits the mask symbolizes. He acknowledges no tension between mask and life, instead arresting his life with a mask. When he put on his costume, he «abandoned my disguise and become myself, free from fear or weakness or lust. My coat, my shoes, my spotless gloves. My face» (V, 18). «This face all that's necessary [...] all I need» (X, 9). Dreiberg comments on Rorschach: «That mask's eaten his brains» (VII, 9), and indeed he is incapable of self-understanding, missing other things besides. The account of the murder of Kitty Genovese that prompted the creation of his mask was almost immediately found to be rife with inconsistencies, and the most sensational claims of indifference to the murder and disregard for the dying victim lacked evidence. He also is the only one of the main characters ignorant of the Comedian's identity. More problematic is his disregard for his dynamic mask: its fabric registers material changes, which Santayana thought superior to introspection for indicating functioning of psyche. Instead of interpreting psyche, Rorschach holds to an abstract meaning of the mask, ignoring the meaning of the events crossing his face. This is the spell of self-knowledge.

The potential value of Rorschach's mask for self-understanding is all the more striking when compared to his habituation expressionlessness. Unmasked Kovacs is described as «very withdrawn, with no expression in either face or voice. Getting a response is often difficult» (VI, 1). Two times he expresses himself freely. First, when he is captured and demasked by cops, he has lost control of the situation and is violently assaulted and mocked. The frame shows a wild-eyed, snarling, bloodied face rendered in burning red, orange, and yellow; he screams, «No! My FACE! Give it BACK! » (V, 28). Second, when Manhattan blocks him from revealing Ozymandias's plot, Rorschach takes off his mask and with angry tears streaming down his contorted face screams, «DO IT!» forcing his death (XII, 24).

Unable to change, harmonize conflicting impulses, or reason, Rorschach cannot continue to live with himself when the mask and the traits it stands for fail to manage the situation. This divided consciousness and internal conflict destroys Rorschach. Either his mask

⁴⁸ B. Dietrich, *The Human Stain: Chaos and the Rage for Order in Watchmen*, cit., p. 122.

dominates life, or Rorschach – invested in his mask as his «true person»⁴⁹ – is overwhelmed by the material flux and dies.

The tragic is not the only mask we might remark. Santayana acknowledged that it is no less human or legitimate to look in directions other than that of our inevitable death and assume masks other than the tragic mask; and he considered, in particular, the comic mask, «the irresponsible, complete, extreme expression of each moment»⁵⁰.

5. The Comic Mask

The Comedian was first noticed in 1939: «a particularly vicious and brutal young man in a gaudy yellow boiler suit» (II, 29-30) who was the youngest of the first generation of masks (II, 3), an original member of the Minutemen at 15⁵¹. He was kicked out of the Minutemen in 1940 for sexually assaulting Silk Spectre. He then fought for the United States in World War II (II, 32) and made «good government connections» (III, 29). He fought in Vietnam and in a rage murdered a woman (II, 13-15; IV, 19). In the 1970s he worked with other masks to subdue public protests (II, 16-18). When masked adventurers were outlawed in 1977, he continued working legally as a government agent (IV, 23).

The Comedian's costume changed more dramatically than that of any other character. After suffering a serious knife wound, he discarded his jester-like yellow and purple suit with the mask of comedy for a belt buckle (II, 5). The new costume was heavy black leather with a red and white striped short sleeve on the right shoulder and blue shoulder pad with a white star on the left (II, 32). He wore a small eye mask until replacing it in the late 1970s (II, 16) with what Gibbons called a «rapist's mask», giving the character an «ominous» and uncomedic appearance⁵². Gibbons thought the costume «looked very serious, so I drew a tiny little yellow smiley faced badge, almost as a throwaway»⁵³.

The *comedic* aspect of a ruthless opportunist, rapist, and murderer wearing the smiley face might be called ironic: he was a crimefighter but committed crimes; he laughed at defenders of justice and joined them to brutalize criminals. But irony is thin cover for the cruelty of «a psychopath»⁵⁴, and irony, cruelty, and psychopathy don't account for the character's comic aspect.

Santayana regarded the comic mask as the mark of «the primitive comedian», who acts impulsively on whim or personal inclination instead of considered reason⁵⁵. The Comedian trading a clown suit for bondage gear recalls Santayana's observation that the primitive comedian will pretend to be one thing one moment but present a different appearance in the next moment. But this change is illusory; the Comedian plays a fixed role of irresponsible and detached individual. He clings to a comic mask even when the costume lacks a mask: the Comedian wearing no mask in a bar in Vietnam is attacked with a broken bottle by a woman pregnant with his child. In a scene similar to the demasking of Rorschach, he screams «My face [...] ghuhuhh. What did you do, you bitch, you hurt my face, you

⁴⁹ G. Santayana, *Soliloquies in England and Later Soliloquies*, cit., p. 133.

⁵⁰ Ivi, p. 137.

⁵¹ Rorschach says the Comedian was 16 when he was in the Minutemen (I, 12); he was born in 1924 (I, 28), and the Minutemen formed in 1939; so, he joined when he was 14 or 15.

⁵² M. Salisbury, *Artists on Comic Art*, London, Titan, 2000, p. 80.

⁵³ N. Serrao, *Watchmen: Behind the Smiley Face*, in «EW.com», 16 June, 2017, p. 63.

⁵⁴ A. Moore, D. Gibbons, N. Gaiman, *A Portal to Another Dimension*, cit.

⁵⁵ G. Santayana, *Soliloquies in England and Later Soliloquies*, cit., p. 135.

whore, you [...] filthy, stinking, worthless [...] lousy piece of [...]», and he murders her with a handgun (II, 14-15). By naming him father of her child and attacking his face, the woman threatened his role as primitive comedian, who is unconnected to others and without responsibilities. When told, «You gunned her down»; he repeats the charge with the responsibility elided: «Yeah, yeah, that's right. Pregnant woman. Gunned her down» (II, 15).

With no origin story, the Comedian appears as if emerging from the wilderness to exercise his strength. His identity as Edward Blake has no story of its own. When invited to join a community, he betrays it for his immediate pleasure through domination. But he also took on social roles, reflecting the development of Santayana's primitive comedian who moves beyond acting on whim to responding to people and things by imitating them. Impulsive behavior becomes mimicry, performing stereotyped roles or imitating responses to human situations. But really this is mockery because the primitive comedian assumes superiority over those imitated. The primitive comedian, who plays many different roles and reverts to an assumed natural self, believes this nimbleness elevates imitator over imitated, who are assumed to be stuck with one perspective only and have no self apart from the appearance imitated⁵⁶. The Comedian in *Watchmen* performs the roles of crimefighter, war hero, and government agent all while mocking ideals of justice, community, sacrifice, and public service as ineffective responses to actual conditions in a brutal and meaningless universe.

The Comedian made this clear in the failed organizational meeting in 1966, deriding the other masks for taking seriously criminal gangs and drug dealers when nuclear war will destroy everything within 30 years. He took nothing seriously, of course, but he thought this the only sensible approach: «once you figure out what a joke everything is, being the Comedian's the only thing makes sense [...] I never said it was a good joke! I'm just playin' along with the gag» (II, 13). He thought he was immune to the insanity he observed in others, like Rorschach after the murder of the six-year-old girl: «I keep things in proportion an' try to see the funny side [...] I kinda like when things get weird, y'know? I like it when all the cards are on the table» (II, 18).

This funny side that the Comedian saw is only surface. He had no insight into the conditions or meaning of what he sees⁵⁷. Like the primitive comedian, he had the shallow understanding of a child but, unlike the child, was not playful, engaging instead in merciless satire. The clowning satirist – regardless of how meticulous the observation and how accurate the imitation of fellow humans – achieves no moral sympathy or wisdom. There is only mocking response, reinforcing the primitive comedian's sense of superiority. The absurdity of the human predicament merely stimulates the primitive comedian to reproduce it, not understand it.

And yet the Comedian had gained a reputation for understanding: Manhattan thought he understood human suffering without caring (IV, 19); Rorschach thought he understood the human «capacity for horrors» and would not look away or quit the fight (VI, 15); and Ozymandias thought he understood that Ozymandias's plot would eliminate the brutality he thrived on and was jealous of Ozymandias's epic joke on humankind (XI, 24-25).

But each is incorrect: When the Comedian discovered Ozymandias's plot – when things got *really* weird and all the cards were on the table for him to see – he demonstrated no

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*.

great understanding of himself or the human condition and had no resources for preserving sanity. He admitted his inability to grasp his situation: «I thought I knew how it was, how the world was. But then I found out about this gag, this joke [...] I can't believe anybody would do that» (II, 22-3). He got drunk and cried, confessed to a former rival the «bad things» he did, and repeatedly begged forgiveness of the Virgin Mary. He asked, «What's funny? [...] I don't get it. [...] somebody explain it to me» (II, 23).

Manhattan is wrong about the Comedian because there is no understanding human suffering without caring about human beings; this is lost on Manhattan who barely finds life significant. Rorschach is wrong because it was precisely Ozymandias's capacity for horrors that overwhelmed the Comedian. Rorschach mistakes the Comedian's tenacity for understanding, when it was only mindless clinging to the comic mask just as Rorschach clings to the tragic mask. Ozymandias is wrong because the Comedian did not despair of losing a competition but of understanding such an unfathomably «bad thing» (II, 23); the Comedian was not resentful, but terrified. Ozymandias acknowledges the terror but is wrong that the Comedian understood. The change in the Comedian was not due to understanding but to the imposition of superior force. The Comedian only drops his mask after Ozymandias throws him from a window, which is fully consistent with Ozymandias's approach to human problems.

The Comedian's disregard of convention and lack of restraint has potential benefits: Just as the clown's leaping and shouting are raw material for dance and drama, so impulsiveness and mimicry provide starting points for criticism. The raw materials are meaningless until harmonized by reflection on past experience. Mindless impulse discharges unnoticed, but actually remarking novel masks is an opportunity for new harmonies; satire becomes criticism and whim becomes inspiration. This introduces reasoning; and primitive comedy, enlightened by understanding and sympathy, becomes humane comedy⁵⁸. Humane comedy is rational in the sense that «the irresponsible, complete, extreme expression of each moment»⁵⁹ is harmonized with a tragic understanding of the human condition. The tension of mask and life is preserved in reasoning. Without this sort of reasoning, the individual's life is especially unstable as the Comedian's turned out to be.

6. Rejecting Masks

In *Watchmen*, the two most powerful characters regard themselves as self-made, have reputations for great intelligence, and are confident they know the truth about the world. Yet they both end up at least as deluded or cruel as Rorschach and the Comedian, causing greater destruction and cultivating greater inhumanity.

Before becoming the only character with superpowers, Dr. Manhattan was physics Ph.D. Jon Osterman, who lost his intrinsic field in a laboratory accident, rendering his body into separate particles. He is presumed dead, but within a month an «electromagnetic pattern resembling consciousness» (IV, 30) assembled a material body: a self-created blue human figure resembling Jon Osterman (with his memories and answering to his name)⁶⁰ with power to rearrange or disintegrate any material object and unaffected by traditional weapons. He synthesizes materials enabling new energy technologies, altering the world

⁵⁸ Ivi, p. 136.

⁵⁹ Ivi, p. 137.

⁶⁰ He also distinguishes himself from Osterman: see XII, 18.

economy (IV, 15). He observes all moments as simultaneous; for him there is no past or future, and to others he seems to perceive the future in the present (IV, 15-16; IX, 5-6, 17; XII, 7-8).

This new being is recruited by the United States government, ensuring military supremacy (securing the invasion of Viet Nam and establishing superiority over the Soviet Union). His employers named him Dr. Manhattan, and dressed him in a dark purple body suit with blue belt and helmet with the atomic whirl on it. He rejected the helmet and the symbol; but officials insisted on a marketable image, so he drew on his forehead a symbol he could respect, that of the hydrogen atom (IV, 12). After five years, he reduced his costume to a sleeveless black leotard, and contrasted himself with masked heroes «wearing disguises» (IV, 17). In another five years, he wore only a black bikini; twelve years after that he wore nothing (although he would dress in a suit and tie for a funeral or television appearance).

Dr. Manhattan, aided by his superpowers – «he can see neutrinos» (VII, 10) – continues Osterman's scientific research. He finds no quantifiable or structural difference between life and death (I, 21) and refuses to «see existence in human terms» obscured by emotion (IX, 23). Regarding scientific knowledge as free of human taint is for Santayana a rejection of masks in favor of being «straightforward»⁶¹, corresponding to the illustrated stripping away of Manhattan's costume. Manhattan rejects human stories about experience and insists he knows the literal truth of existence. Though this is yet another story – another mask – more precise and less idiosyncratic. The denial of masks results in a mania for reason – reason pursued unreasonably becoming a madness for exactness and literalness.

For Santayana, matter is of interest not because it is an accessible literal truth behind masks, but because it produces minds and presents masks, including masks of science – hydrogen atom, theory, chaos labeled as such – that can direct human activity in ways more congenial than non-scientific conceptions to continued human experience. But «did we have nothing but electrical physics to think of, the nightmare would soon become intolerable»⁶². There is value in touring Mars with Manhattan and observing the limits of human perspectives, the non-human scale of the landscape, and its inorganic history. Our perspective need not mislead us, limiting reality to our own scale and taking masks for material existences, which is a mistake Manhattan makes again and again. Masks «[remain] our natural companions [...] It is fortunate that the material world, whatever may be its intrinsic structure or substance, falls to our apprehension into such charming units»⁶³.

Santayana's words describe Manhattan: «the masks of life, are odious to him; yet he is quite happy to be deceived and to be masked by a thick atmosphere of convention»⁶⁴. Osterman's life before and after the accident bears this out. He remarked «[o]ther people seem to make all my moves for me» (IV, 5): his father determined his career; his colleagues inadvertently removed his intrinsic field; and, then, after gaining superpowers, he was subject to government control, media influence, and Ozymandias's manipulation. Egotistically, he makes this lifelong experience of impotence into a universal truth, believing «everything is preordained [...] [he] is just a puppet who can see the strings» (IX, 5). He claims the universe *is* the masks he finds it wearing; a confusion invisible when

⁶¹ G. Santayana, *Soliloquies in England and Later Soliloquies*, cit., p. 130.

⁶² Ivi, p. 124.

⁶³ Ivi, p. 125.

⁶⁴ Ivi, p. 131.

masks are denied. Santayana thought the choice is «between a mask and a fig-leaf»⁶⁵, meaning we acknowledge masks and interpret or enjoy them as appropriate or else we deny there is nothing else behind the fig-leaf we insist on wearing: «Art and discipline render seemly what would be unseemly without them, but hypocrisy hides it ostentatiously under something irrelevant, and the fig-leaf is only a more ignominious mask»⁶⁶. Manhattan may go naked, but he covers the reality of human feelings and perceptions with science, leading him into hypocrisy and contradiction.

Manhattan's ignorance of masks results in ignorance of himself, apparent in his contradictory words and actions. He criticizes Laurie Juspezyk for being blinded by her emotions (IX, 23) after he has consciously lied to his first partner (IV, 11) about his desire for the younger Juspezyk who becomes his partner (IV, 17-18), teleported an entire audience after becoming angry with a journalist's questions (III, 13-16); and retreated to Mars to sulk, having lost all concern with humanity when Juspezyk left him. He denigrates the human perspective but quite comfortably anthropomorphizes inorganic processes (a planet *choosing* not to support life) and praises in poetic and value terms (IX, 14, 19) the «breathtaking» and «excellent» Martian landscape in comparison to human existence (IX, 18).

The apparent contradiction in Manhattan's character would not matter if he really were a god. Honesty, courage, and friendship would be meaningless for a god, unmatched power obviating need and capacity for virtue. How could one be an excellent human being when one is no longer a human being? Manhattan's character is interesting because of the tension between his (sporadic) humanity and his new way of being. Manhattan acquired god-like powers through an extreme trauma. Perhaps extreme symptoms of post-traumatic stress resemble traits of a god. Traumatic experiences resist narrative ordering in memory and remain a present disrupting experience. They are not past experiences but powerful and detailed present sensations of the trauma. Osterman's extreme trauma may have inhibited experiences of temporal distinction or what Santayana called «sentimental time»: representations in human terms (masks) of changes in material existence⁶⁷. Manhattan's altered experience of time recalls Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* in which Billy Pilgrim comes unstuck in time. Both characters survive violence that threatens all bodily integrity and live with stories lacking reliable patterns and a sense of utter loss of control. Manhattan exclaims: «It's all getting out of my hands» (IV, 12) and sees «the whole continuum, life's pattern or lack of one» (IX, 23).

Ozymandias's plan to fake an alien invasion is, in the words of *Watchmen* illustrator Dave Gibbons, a «macguffin [...] the plot itself is of no great consequence»⁶⁸. Fittingly, Ozymandias is the least interesting character of the comic book; driven by ambition and lust for control, he's an authoritarian mass murderer of no great insight. Born Adrian Veidt, the exceptionally bright child of immigrants, he believed his intelligence self-willed, a result of his decision to be intelligent. Orphaned at 17, he gave up an inheritance and life of ease because he «burned with the paradoxical urge to do everything» (XI, 8) and wanted «to prove that I could accomplish anything [...] starting from absolutely nothing» (XI,30).

He took as the measure of success the Macedonian king Alexander the Great (356-323 BCE), whom he idolized for the empire he established. But he realized Alexander's empire

⁶⁵ Ivi, p. 139.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁷ G. Santayana, *Realms of Being*, cit., p. 256.

⁶⁸ M. Salisbury, *Artists on Comic Art*, London, Titan, 2000, p. 82.

had been unstable, fragmenting after his death. He took new inspiration from the pharaohs of Egypt, who established a culture both intellectually rich and stable. Honoring both inspirations he took the Greek name of Pharaoh Rameses the Second, Ozymandias, and attempted to apply the wisdom of antiquity to contemporary problems (XI, 8-11). He claims to have become a superhero by believing in himself and his potential, asserting anyone could do the same: «physical exercise, meditation and study aren't terribly esoteric» (XI, 30). After cultivating extraordinary strength and intelligence, he was slow to figure out that fighting street crime would not ensure global stability. The Comedian's sarcasm alerted him to his «sham crusade» fighting symptoms rather than causes. He quit masked crime fighting in 1975, two years before it was outlawed, retaining public sympathy when other masks were feared and ridiculed (V, 17; II, 16). He built a business empire, gaining wealth and power to carry out his plan: Frightening «governments into co-operation, I would convince them that earth faced imminent attack by beings from another world» (XI, 21, 22, 24, 30). He appears to accomplish this, simulating an alien invasion that halts all terrestrial hostilities and kills three million people in New York City, with all others who knew of the plot either murdered or committed to keeping the secret.

In addition to murdering the Comedian, Ozymandias is what Santayana called an enemy of comedy⁶⁹. He craves control and hates unpredictability and variety in human experience. He claims «there is no ordinary person» and «anyone can be a hero», but this is no pluralism: one becomes «extraordinary» and a «hero» following his «step by step guide» (XI, 31; X, 32). He disciplines himself, believing power is simply a choice; if others seem to have chosen not to control themselves, he must do it for them.

His unacknowledged mask of self-control ensures hypocrisy and loss of expressiveness. His order and righteousness are a pose. Illustrations of Ozymandias show stereotypes of a performer (masculine hero, reflective sage, righteous victor). His words are platitudes: «You get to be a superhero by believing in the hero within you and summoning him or her forth by an act of will» (XI, 30); cynical calculations of how to direct human longings into fantasies profitable for his business (X, 31); polished interview answers of unconvincing humility, unshakeable confidence, and unfunny jokes (XI, 29-32). Santayana thought that comedy, when suppressed, «goes on silently behind the scenes, until perhaps it gets the upper hand and becomes positive madness»⁷⁰, a striking example being when Ozymandias soliloquizes to loyal assistants he has just poisoned to ensure they never reveal his plans (XI, 7-11).

7. Living with Masks

As their names suggest, Nite Owl II and Silk Spectre II are the least original characters, but they are the most successful in their struggles to live sanely with masks. They acknowledge the danger of the masks they wear: Dreiberg tells of trying out an exo-skeleton prototype that resulted in a broken arm; Juspeczyk responds, «That sounds like the sort of costume that could really mess you up», and Dreiberg asks, «Is there any other sort?» (VII, 8). They don't deny masks or use them to hide. Masks are vital to their learning how to cultivate stronger human relationships. (Their witty exchanges are humane comedy – critical, not mocking; demonstrating tendencies to reasoning and humanity).

⁶⁹ G. Santayana, *Soliloquies in England and Later Soliloquies*, cit., p. 138.

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*.

Dan Dreiberg's interests in birds, airplanes, and mythology and university studies in zoology and aeronautics disappointed his father, who wanted his son to become a banker like him. Instead, Dreiberg, bored and rich after inheriting his father's wealth, took up the crime-fighting identity of his hero Hollis Mason, the retired Nite Owl (VII, 8). Nite Owl II is distinguished by his use of technology: night vision goggles, respirator, pocket laser; radar-invisible aircraft with various defenses and weapons; auxiliary costumes for different conditions (underwater, radioactive contamination); and his procedural use of computers to find patterns among data (VII, 6, 9; VIII, 4; X, 9).

Laurie Juspezyk was raised to fulfill her mother's fantasies (VII.5; IX.14) and become «a big tough super-lady, like [her] mom», Silk Spectre (IX, 11). This meant physical training overseen by her mother (IX, 12) and wearing «a stupid costume because my stupid mother wanted me to» (I, 25; IV, 23; VIII, 8). Already a mask at 16 years old, she began a relationship with Manhattan in 1966, leaving him 19 years later and starting a relationship with Dreiberg. Shortly after this, she realized that the Comedian, known to her as the man who nine years before her birth sexually assaulted her mother, was her father (making it especially appropriate that she should be a practitioner of humane comedy).

Both retired when masked adventurers were outlawed in 1977, and both struggled to find a meaningful life after that. Juspezyk was «a kept woman for the military's secret weapon», living with Manhattan at a government military research center (I, 25). She was secure but bored, lonely, and with «no real human contact» but also no privacy (VII, 7, 10). She wanted contact but didn't «know any body except goddamned [...] superheroes» (III, 8). Dreiberg sees his adventuring past as an adolescent fantasy, but he can't quite move on, keeping his old costumes and equipment (VII, 7). Neither Dreiberg nor Juspezyk respond to changing conditions by clinging to a particular mask or rejecting masks outright, but finding the right response was difficult. Their story is about finding more vital masks after connecting with each other.

One reader characterized Dreiberg and Juspezyk as «rather broken individuals [...] making few if any real human connections»⁷¹. Though plausible, this is highly misleading. The pair are broken in the ways each of us is broken off from others by limited perspectives, conflicting impulses, and mortality; they are exemplary in learning how to establish connections under extreme conditions. Their responses to imposed masks are improvised, increasingly self-aware, and salutary for relating to others as human beings.

When Dreiberg and Juspezyk become intimate, he is unable to have sex though he wants to. Discouraged, he wakes in the middle of night, puts on his costume, and takes his aircraft out on patrol. Juspezyk comes along, surprising him by wearing her costume, and together they rescue people from a burning building. Afterward, they have sex. She asks, «Did the costumes make it good?» (VII, 28). He says, yes, remarking how strange it feels to admit it. The restored identities bring self-confidence and honesty, enabling an intimate relationship that grows beyond the old masks.

Among their peers, they are the only ones with long-standing and close human relationships: Dreiberg rejected his father's mask and chose the mask of his hero who becomes a mentor and friend he visits weekly (I, 9). Dreiberg is the only person Rorschach explicitly acknowledged as a friend (X, 10), and Dreiberg proves this by illegally donning his mask to break Rorschach out of prison. Juspezyk, as the offspring of two masks and the intimate partner of another, struggled not to be completely subsumed – by maternal

⁷¹ B. Dietrich, *The Human Stain: Chaos and the Rage for Order in Watchmen*, cit., p. 128.

domination, grief and anger at her father, or the inhumane chill of superpowers; yet she does maintain a relationship with her mother, unlike Manhattan who let his father think his son had died in a lab accident (IV, 19). Juspeczyk also grieves the millions of Ozymandias's dead victims calling them «people» (XII, 7-8), again unlike Manhattan, who denies any structural difference between life and death or special value of humanity (I, 21; IX, 8-9, 13).

Juspeczyk's refusal to be dominated and Dreiberg's awareness of adolescent motivations of his career keep them from getting stuck in the past. But Juspeczyk's resistance is similar to the uncompromising and independent Rorschach or unrestrained Comedian, and Dreiberg's judgment is similar to the cynical Comedian or reinvented Adrian Veidt. What makes the difference is their desire for connection, their regard for human life, and reasoning. Dreiberg does not forsake humanity in his devotion to science. Unlike Manhattan who is oblivious to his own poetic tendencies, Dreiberg knows that «scientific understanding [...] does not impede a poetic appreciation of [...] phenomenon. Rather the two enhance each other» (VII, 32). Similarly, Dreiberg's recognition of the need for the technological aide of auxiliary costumes demonstrates flexibility in the use of masks; which is repeated in his careful planning as when he «set up emergency identities years ago» (VIII, 21) enabling him and Juspeczyk to ditch their old identities, elude authorities, and start new lives (though they reveal themselves to Juspeczyk's mother and honor Hollis by taking his name as their new surname) (XII, 28). They acknowledge the need for masks and use them with growing wisdom to understand themselves and live well.

Near the end of the story, Manhattan notes that «exposing [Ozymandias's] plot, we destroy any chance of peace, dooming earth to worse destruction» (XII, 20). Dreiberg gives a classical example of wisdom, acknowledging his limits: «How can humans make decisions like this? We're damned if we stay quiet, earth's damned if we don't. We [...] okay. Okay, count me in. We say nothing [...]. This is too big to be hard-assed about!» (XII, 20). A few pages later Juspeczyk and Dreiberg have cut and dyed their hair, Dreiberg wears a mustache and no glasses. They do not rule out adventuring but already they consider different names and masks.

8. Conclusion

Risks of masks are reduced when we «see more and believe less»⁷² – when you attend to the changing variety of masks and are cautious in committing to the existence of what they might stand for. Life has more dignity, harmony, and is saner when this attention aids reasoning, which increasing understanding. Comic books are helpful for practicing seeing more and believing less since they invite you to attend to a narrative in novel ways: the eyes move in unaccustomed directions as you inspect images, their arrangements, their details; the physical placement of text can suggest enlightening parallels or interesting ambiguities when considered with juxtaposed images. More questions and interpretations arise.

In *Watchmen*, images reveal changes in the masks and costumes – especially the variety of otherwise unremarked patterns of Rorschach's mask. You can see the subtle expressions of shock, sadness, or fear in the Comedian and of delight, annoyance, or anger in Manhattan – two characters who deny such emotions; the collection of stereotyped poses and postures of Ozymandias; and the changes in bearing and general appearance in Dreiberg and Juspeczyk as they come out of depression or fall in love or start new lives. This can be

⁷² G. Santayana, *Soliloquies in England and Later Soliloquies*, cit., p. 127.

conveyed in words, as I'm not claiming absolute superiority of one over the other. But reading text in a conventional format (Santayana's texts) and reading comics (*Watchmen*) are different experiences. The assumption here is that experience is more than information, and the different experiences draw attention to that in an immediate way and in the context of considering the importance of attention to masks.

Scott McCloud explained that often times images in comics amplify through simplification; it is not «just a way of drawing, it's a way of seeing»⁷³ with a focus and intensity – practice for seeing more and believing less. Comics are an excellent way to bring out the double aspect of what nature presents to mind⁷⁴. They present a spectacle that engages in a way sensuously distinct from reading text. They also present shockingly obvious (though sometimes forgotten) evidence they deal in unrealities – the flat, abstract images are not the things they portray – this is not a superhero, this is not an alien life form, this is not a way to live sanely. Comics can help us engage with masks as masks not the things they stand for, and with essences as essences and not existences. Obviously, this is true of texts too, and in particular Santayana's texts. But read together, they offer experiences of attending, distinguishing, and reasoning that are not present with one of the media alone. Reading in this way may free spirit to appreciate a variety of masks, limbering up psyche for responding beneficially to changing material conditions. Seeing more increases awareness of possibilities and enriches reasoning; this enables stronger harmonies and, when necessary, refines beliefs that aid understanding apply more widely to nature.

The extraordinary skills and talents of superheroes may tempt them to forego practices of attention and reasoning. Their great strengths, symbolized by masks, can make subtler methods seem unnecessary; they cling to their strengths and identify with their masks. The ignorance, gullibility, and dogmatism of Rorschach and the instability of the Comedian result from their tenacious clinging to their masks; the arrogance and isolation of Ozymandias and Manhattan result from their denial of masks; Drieberg and Juspeczyk, who have much different relationships to their masks than their colleagues and than each other, are able to acknowledge and make use of changing masks to live sanely. If Santayana is right, these characters are exaggerated images of risks each of us faces and, if Moore and Gibbons have been successful, these characters raise important questions for us about how we might live sanely.

⁷³ S. McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, [New York?], Paradox Press, 1999, p. 31.

⁷⁴ G. Santayana, *Soliloquies in England and Later Soliloquies*, cit., p. 126.