

The Medium of the Mystic: Gnosis in the Works of Grant Morrison and Alan Moore

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Dedicated to Tammy Breckenridge, or Tzaddia Morningstar

Daughter, sister, wife, a friend to many and mother to one
whose enduring memory and presence is testament to the lasting magic of
the kind word and the compassionate gesture

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I would like to thank all of my family and all of my friends. There is no me without you.

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Abstract

In this thesis I explore the potential of art to convey spiritual and/or liberating ideas with the examination of three case studies: a visionary voice from the past in William Blake with his illuminated works and the contemporary voices of Grant Morrison and Alan Moore with their respective comics *The Invisibles* and *Promethea*. I use gnosis, or illumination, as the conceptual fulcrum on which I analyze these works as it covers every facet of the artistic experience: the influence on the artists, the intent behind their works, the content of the works, and the reader's experience of the works. Another conceptual thread is the choice of medium—comics. While Blake's illuminated works have not traditionally been categorized as comics, an inclusive definition of the form brings these seemingly disparate works together for an analysis of their multimodal nature, the efficacy of their construction, and their conveyance of illuminating concepts representative of the power inherent in the creative process.

Table of Contents

Dedication.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Abstract.....	v
I. Introduction.....	pg. 1
II. Preliminaries: The Multimodality of Comics and Spiritual Practice	pg. 5
III. Prologue: The Vision of William Blake.....	pg. 9
IV. Say You Want a Revolution: Grant Morrison and <i>The Invisibles</i>	pg. 13
V. The Serpent and the Moon: Alan Moore and <i>Promethea</i>	pg. 31
VI. Conclusion.....	pg. 50
VII. Works Cited.....	pg. 53

Introduction

Art is humanity's greatest discovery, the wellspring of culture. Any conscious being that has looked up at those distant lights above or at the nature that both nurtures and destroys below has seen a common thing: beauty, or to put it another way, significance. Art is the way in which humanity has responded to the recognition of this significance. The first artists did not only recognize the significance of the world around them, but they also imbued the world around them with significance. The artist involved him/herself in a recursive practice. If the origins of art were to be traced, it may be found to reside in the ancient shamanic tradition. At some point in time, a single individual recognized the beauty and significance of the world around him or her and began to partake in the recursive practice of art for his or her self and the benefit of his/her fellow tribe. If one were also to trace the origins of spirituality and/or magic, it might very well lead to the same point: that sudden influx of an expanded consciousness that could very well be acknowledged as a step in human evolution. While this observation is merely conjecture, it is a theory that will gain increasing significance with the following observations.

Art has freed minds and shattered limitations, and its use is evidence of its importance to humanity as a tool for enlightenment. Unfortunately, this enlightening tradition of art has fallen by the wayside with the advent of various currents including art's active suppression by those who feared its power and its contemporary use in the desperate attempt to profit. There have been those who recognized the revolutionary power of art in both the broad context of society and the singular context of the individual; while both of these perspectives are crucial, the individual's experience will be the focus here as the reader's interaction with the work is key. Personal and/or spiritual revolution or

revelation is often brought about by some sort of experience either gradually or instantaneously. As the title of this work suggests, gnosis will be of much importance in the following work. “Gnosis” is a difficult term because of its etymological origins (Greek for “knowledge”) and its problematic ties to “Gnosticism”, an umbrella term created in a derogatory sense by Platonist Henry Moore (1614-1687) to label the 2nd and 3rd century religious sects deemed heretical by the Christian Church. However, the term “gnosis” has achieved a degree of independence over the years, referring to the reception of esoteric knowledge which results in the illumination and liberation of the self (“Gnosticism”) Specifically, it means knowledge of a spiritual magnitude, for gnosis can occur with the swiftness of lightning or the slow burn of never-ending embers to those who have sought it their entire lives or to those completely unaware of the concept. Regardless of its subtlety or intensity, the gnostic experience is a profound moment in one’s life. The domain through which gnosis has reached most individuals is that of art with its great multiplicity. This thesis will examine how a select triumvirate of artists have utilized media incorporating both image and text in order to expand the minds of their readers, specifically the illuminated works of William Blake, *The Invisibles* (1994-2000) by Grant Morrison, and *Promethea* (1999-2005) by Alan Moore.

Like his veritable spiritual successors Morrison and Moore, Blake’s greatest works were done within a composite medium of his own design. He meticulously invented a medium that he believed could effectively communicate his ideas and that combined both image and text together. His tireless devotion to crafting these illuminated works suggests that his intention was for the image and text to be experienced in unison by the reader. His status as a mystic has been noted by critics over the years. Some critics have no

problem accepting Blake as a mystic, but many think that he suffered from neurosis and was essentially mad. The validity of this stance is difficult to understand since madness is a matter of perspective. Even if Blake was ill in some way, he produced a significant body of work that has ascended into the literary pantheon long after his death. His status as mystic will be of much importance in this thesis, acting as an effective, historical launch-pad and weaving into the works of the latter two writers. He seems to be on a similar wavelength, so to speak, as Morrison and Moore, since they share so many attributes such as being mystically inclined, radical in belief, and rebellious by nature. Aside from the occasional reference to Blake, these two comics auteurs seem to be spiritual successors of the visionary poet, receiving the torch and bringing that forbidden or forgotten fire into the minds of their readers.

Morrison, a writer as well as a practitioner of magic, uses the medium of comics to convey mystical ideals in *The Invisibles* with sigil magic as a central part of his creative process. The sigil is essentially the use of symbols to achieve a desired effect, but Morrison amped up the concept to include plot and narrative. *The Invisibles* was a conscious attempt by Morrison to bring about change in both the real world and within himself and marks a crucial transition for the writer as it literally changed the way he perceives and lives in the world around him. Such radical, personal change by the creation of art is a prevalent theme in the thesis.

Moore, considered by many to be the grand master of the graphic story medium, is important not only because of his writings but also his approach to writing. When he turned forty in 1993, he declared himself a magician not of the stage trickery variety but a ceremonial magician. His observations on the relationship between magic and art are

crucial in examining his work as a writer and magus. In particular, his comic *Promethea* uses the medium to introduce his readers to alternative observations on spirituality and art and how the two are inextricably linked.

Blake, Morrison, and Moore can be examined through the theme of gnosis, which is crucial to understanding them because it informs their entire worldview and in turn affects their creative process, the works which they produce, the work itself, and the reader's experience with these works. I will use gnosis as a multifaceted theme that covers all of these areas. In the prologue, I will establish Blake as a model artist who celebrated the spiritual significance of art. Before delving into these case studies, I will lay down some baseline knowledge and research on spiritual practice and multimodality in a preliminaries section. The role of gnosis will be explored within the writers' lives, their works, and the reader's experience with the work. The preliminary and prologue sections will be effective in the reading of two contemporary comics writers, shining light on a shamanic tradition that continues to live.

Preliminaries: The Multimodality of Comics and Spiritual Practice

The comics medium has often been written off as an amateur and mediocre form of art in comparison to its more refined predecessors, namely those of the visual or written form. With the advent of comics during the early twentieth century, one would be derided for reading these “funny books” as they were seen as material tailored to the dispositions of children. Comics have always been an underground form of art: reactionary in the form of political cartoons and satirical in William Hogarth’s *Morality* series. The comic is an enduring art form that reaches back to the Bayeux Tapestry, depicting the Norman Conquest, and even further with the wall paintings of the ancient Egyptians, just to name a few. In defining the medium, Scott McCloud expands on Will Eisner’s classic definition of the form as “sequential art” to “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (9). This definition provides a common link to seemingly diverse works throughout the history of art itself, thereby elevating the perception of comics from dealing with either political caricature or super-humans with an odd fashion sense.

A highly visual form, the comic stands out with its prevalent use of iconic images which act as signifiers of a certain meaning. McCloud divides the icon into three separate categories: icons symbolic of an abstract concept, icons of practical use such as language and mathematics, and icons of pictorial representation (27). The human capacity for icon interpretation allows meaning to be conveyed and obtained in numerous and innovative ways. Upon seeing two dots above a line, any viewer would interpret such a basic image as a face. Iconography is also a key component to religious or spiritual experience, and it

does so in two distinct ways: the representation of deity and the imbuing of symbols with divine significance. The former is either embraced or deplored depending on the spiritual practice in question. Some religions view the representation of the divine in art or artifact to be blasphemous as the subject cannot adequately be expressed in artistic forms and therefore should not be. Other systems, such as Hinduism, view idolization as a necessary means “not to fully represent the deity, but rather to assist necessarily limited mortal minds in apprehending some aspect of the divine” through the medium of artistic expression (Orcutt 96). The latter use of iconography needs little explanation. Anybody with access to a tree branch, a mere twig, or at least one digit on each hand has the technology to create one of the most powerful and acknowledged symbols in the religious world in the form of the Christian cross.

One of the key characteristics of the comics medium is the level of immersion and participation that is achieved as the reader experiences the work. The efficacy of the cartoon image/character, a particularly effective icon, McCloud notes, is “a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled. An empty shell that we inhabit which enables us to travel in another realm. We don’t just observe the cartoon, we become it!” (36). Here the reader is able to project him/herself onto a static image, giving it voice, movement, personality, and meaning. McCloud concludes his observation on icons by saying that they “demand our participation to make them work.” The icons are merely ink on paper, ideas tied to the second dimension of the page without the presence of the reader to imbue it with significance. “There is no life here except that which you give to it” (56). If one were to gaze upon a crucifix unaware of the dominant social paradigms of the present day, they would see suffering. If they knew the context, the story behind the

image, they would see selfless sacrifice. The reader is integral to the creation of the story, the fashioning of meaning behind an image. But what about a “deliberate sequence” of images?

The immersive aspect of the comics medium is not limited to the mechanics of a single image but rather a succession of images in sequence often achieved by an arrangement of panels, rectangular enclosures depicting a snapshot of a certain moment and/or icons. McCloud defines the process by which the reader extrapolates meaning from the juxtaposed images as “closure” (63). However, the spaces within the panels are not entirely responsible for the medium’s structure; the spaces in between are equally as critical if not more so. The space between the panels is often referred to as the gutter, often appearing as a nondescript white space. It is within this space where the “magic” of comics take place. From the very first panel or image of the comic, the reader is in contract with the creator to construct a full picture from the view of mere windows. As McCloud concludes quite nicely, “the dance of the *visible* and the *invisible* is at the very heart of comics” where the “creator and reader are partners in the invisible creating something out of nothing” (my italics 205). This participation, born from the construction of the comic, is what makes the comics medium in its various forms particularly effective at conveying spiritual ideas or any sort of idea for that matter.

Comics are one of the few inherently multimodal art forms, and, as far as their construction is concerned, they are rather simple in their base materials. Film may incorporate language, sound, and image to praiseworthy effects, but it requires different forms of technology and a crew behind it to achieve fruition. The base materials of the

comics medium are simply a pen and paper and a concentrated imagination with intention.

The multimodality of spiritual practice is a critical observation in the study of the intersection between art and spiritual experience since this border is where the following artists yearn to tread. Aside from the spiritual texts and the pervasive use of iconography, there also lies a performance aspect to spirituality that makes the practice recursive and kinetic, a result of understanding that leads to action. The following writers/artists exemplify this amazing interplay of spirituality and art.

Prologue: The Vision of William Blake

In 1761 at the age of four, Blake saw God's head at his window. He screamed at the apparition's powerful, seemingly divine presence and perceived that event as a sign of destiny, but he did not know yet its course. The catalyst for his lifelong devotion to art appeared to him later as a spirit with the following message: "Blake, be an artist and nothing else. In this there is felicity" (qtd in Wilson 2). Every moment that preceded that experience was dedicated to the fulfillment of that message, crafting himself into a considerable artist. Blake's family were individualistic, working-class Protestants without access to the education of the affluent aristocracy, so Blake became an autodidact, fashioning his own education and creating his own worldview. From an early age, he would immerse himself in works of literature ranging from Shakespeare to Milton, to the Holy Bible (Wilson 3). His reverence for the power of the word fashioned his unique perspective on any text. To Blake, the Bible was foremost poetry, and any subsequent interpretation was based on the premise of it being a creative artifact. This is an early example of Blake's tendency to view the boundary between art and the divine as permeable rather than clearly distinctive.

In 1772, Blake took up a seven-year apprenticeship with an engraver, from whom he learned techniques that became essential parts of his creative process for hundreds of commissioned and personal works (Wilson 3). During the day, he worked on his commissioned work, which ranged from illustrating other works such as certain parts of the Old Testament and drawing images that came to him during séances with occultist and watercolorist John Varley. His defining work, particularly his illuminated works, were done during the night when pure inspiration roused him from his sleep. Of the many

facets of Blake's collected works, perhaps one of the most interesting is the medium he chose, or rather created, in order to convey his message. According to Northrop Frye, Blake utilized a "radical form of mixed art," in which both imagery and text ought to be experienced by the reader as a whole rather than separately (qtd in Mitchell 3). Many critics are assiduously opposed to such composite art forms, preferring to experience and study art under clearly defined distinctions. In analyzing any of Blake's work, such a conservative approach bears little insight as the man himself actively tried to unleash himself and his art from seemingly infallible paradigms. The reason why a dissection of text from the image and vice versa within Blake's illuminated work is unnecessary is because the truly unique mechanics of this composite medium is lost in the process. It is difficult not to be enchanted by either the text or the images within his work as both are equally compelling; however, the union of text and design opens up an infinite realm of possibilities which transcend that of mere illustration. At some points within his work, there is an interplay between the two forms that work like "counterpoint in music, or . . . the interaction of image and sound in cinema" as Mitchell put it (9). The clever juxtaposition of two media that seem entirely disparate pulls the reader into a dynamic participation with the work and Blake himself; they become part of the process rather than a passive audience.

Blake claimed that the spirit of his brother Robert came to him in a vision and imparted to him the unique method of relief etching which the artist would use to craft his illuminated works. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, which features Blake's journey into Hell a la Milton and Dante, a devil states that humanity will never experience the divine infinity in all things without significant "improvement of sensual enjoyment." The

devil states that the first step is for humanity to rid itself of the idea of a body/soul dichotomy. Blake then says that he will communicate this message by “printing in the infernal method by corrosives . . . melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite which was hid. If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite” (CPP 39). This is a direct reference to Blake’s actual process in crafting his illuminated work which involved the application of acidic powder on copper plates. In his mind, a composite medium of his own design could better convey and reveal the infinity in all things, that is, the holiness of all things. “He who sees the Infinite in all things sees God” (3). While the materialistic world of today sees every little thing simply as it appears and for its uses, Blake could look at a grain of sand and imbue it with eternal significance: “To see a World in a Grain of Sand/And a Heaven in a Wild Flower/Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand/And Eternity in an hour” (490).

With much importance placed on the Blake’s physical art, it is crucial to attempt an understanding of his spiritual inclinations. Even a quick perusal of Blake’s work would reveal Christian allegory with his mentions of Jesus and numerous events in the Bible; however, Blake’s Jesus and/or God is not the holy figure of traditional Christian sects. In Blake’s view, Jesus is an aspect of the Poetic Genius, the imaginative faculty of God and man alike. The Poetic Genius is the divinity of man and the humanity of the divine. Blake also believed that all Gods and Goddesses of antiquity were the product of the human imagination, but when humans attributed the creation of their mythology to the mythology itself, the human genesis of religion was lost in closed circuit logic. While Blake frequently referred to the Bible and the Christian mythos, he was also subject to more esoteric forms of spirituality that had taken root within London society. Blake’s

father was a proponent of the teachings of theologian and mystic Emanuel Swedenborg. Many critics have pointed out the self-proclaimed prophet as an early influence on Blake's mysticism, yet Blake's relationship with Swedenborg and his message was short-lived as is evident in Blake's citing and criticism of the prophet in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, the title and content of which is a direct antithesis to Swedenborg's *Heaven and Hell*. It is impossible to pinpoint exactly what Blake's spiritual proclivities were as he never seemed to tie himself down to any mode of thinking; as his oeuvre developed, much of his subsequent writings contradicted past works. Blake was an explorer of the spiritual and imaginative realms, and his works, certainly his illuminated art, were his method of processing these experiences and communicating them to others.

Blake was radical in both his politics and spiritual vision. Like Thomas Paine during the American Revolution, Blake was a proponent of rebellion and revolution where rebellion and revolution were due. Both The American Revolution and The French Revolution received much praise in Blake's *America: A Prophecy* and *The French Revolution*. For any revolution to occur in society, it must first occur within those who seek it. As above, so below. His views on spiritual revolution reach their culmination in his apocalyptic vision. Unlike the rather tempestuous and disheartening apocalypse of the Old Testament, Blake's apocalypse will occur when humanity becomes aware of the revolutionary powers of its own imaginative faculties and the interconnectedness of all life. This apocalyptic vision bears startling comparison to that of Morrison and Moore in their respective works *The Invisibles* and *Promethea*.

Say You Want a Revolution: Grant Morrison and *The Invisibles*

In his youth during the Cold War, Grant Morrison lived under the shadow of the bomb. His father was a WWII veteran-turned-pacifist who actively tried to lift the veil off the staggering armaments in Scotland at the American military's disposal, making visible the invisible hand grasping a dead man's nuclear switch. One of Morrison's earliest fears was this specter of the atomic bomb, which would not be assuaged until his immersion into the world of American superhero comics, which were often used as ballast on the ships containing the destructive payloads. The horrors of the bomb could easily be overridden by the near godlike strengths and abilities of Superman, other heroes, and the larger shadows cast by the even more malevolent cosmic forces which these heroes fought. As Morrison says, "Before it was a Bomb, the Bomb was an idea . . . Superman is so indefatigable a product of the human imagination, such a perfectly designed emblem of our highest [. . .] selves, that my Idea of the Bomb had no defense against him" (*Supergods* xv). At an early age, Morrison turned to the liberating faculties of the human imagination in order to overcome a lackluster adolescence in Glasgow.

Stepping Over the Precipice

There is a card in the Tarot that, in its most iconic form, depicts a smiling, seemingly oblivious young man walking towards a cliff or precipice of some sort; this is card zero—the Fool. A common interpretation is that the Fool represents the beginning of a journey into the unknown, that first step towards the endless possibilities life has to offer and the dissolution of imposed boundaries. This decision is often preceded by an experience or revelation that prompts one to venture off the beaten path and into the wild forest beyond.

After being rejected from art school circa 1979, Morrison found himself at age nineteen without any sense of trajectory in his life. Trapped in a personal and social stasis, he turned to magic in order to reorient himself in the world. His uncle, a proponent of the counterculture with an interest in the spiritual philosophies of the iconoclastic occultist Aleister Crowley, gave Morrison a Thoth tarot deck and the accompanying essay, *The Book of Thoth*, which details the intricate Kabbalistic and astrological symbolism contained with the seventy-eight images. Driven by desperation and curiosity, Morrison performed a ritual from a Crowley text. There didn't seem to be an immediate reaction until he lay down on his bed and felt this malevolent presence accompanied by a "gravitational point in the air . . . drawing all perspectives towards it" and an image of a lion's head and an undertone of cryptic verbalisms that seemed to come from the deep recesses of his mind (Meaney 280). Although the experience was quite terrifying, it imprinted upon Morrison a lifelong interest in magic, spirituality, and altered states of consciousness; however, his conscious attempt to synthesize this with his creative endeavors would not be attempted until his work in the nineties, specifically *The Invisibles*.

By his mid-twenties, Morrison had established himself already as a comics writer, with material being published in *Near Myths* (1978-1980) and *Starblazer* (1979-1987). After the incredible success of Alan Moore's work in the early eighties with *Miracleman* (1982-1984) and *Swamp Thing* (1984-1987), DC Comics scoured Britain for talent on par with the game-changing writer. Morrison was one of these writers. Even his earliest DC works show a writer who was eager to push storytelling the boundaries the medium. On his *Doom Patrol* run (1989-1993), he drew heavily upon experimental approaches to art

such as the Situationist movement, Dada, and Surrealism to add even more depth and strangeness to the outcast heroes of the DC Universe. With *Animal Man* (1988-1990), he took the rather obscure character of Buddy Baker and created a post-modern examination of the relationship between the creator and the created. In one sequence, Morrison actually wrote himself into the comic to converse with the character whose family Morrison had killed off for the sake of story. This was also his first use of the “fiction suit,” a literary device he would use to great effect in subsequent works. In 1989, he collaborated with Dave McKean to create a fully painted psychological horror-drama in *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth*, an introspective take on Batman and the darkest parts of the Dark Knight’s psyche. The premiere of Tim Burton’s *Batman* coincided with the release of the comic, which generated immense sales, making it to this day one of the highest selling graphic novels of all time. Morrison suddenly found himself with more money than he had ever imagined growing up in a working class household in Glasgow. Previously, he was a “straight-edge mod” who had never partaken in drugs or alcohol in the slightest. With his sudden financial success, he began to experiment with alcohol and psychedelics, exploring territories he had only read about in the works of William S. Burroughs, Terrence McKenna, Timothy Leary, and Robert Anton Wilson. With the resources available to him, he traveled the world and partook in what Arthur Rimbaud referred to as “a complete and systematic derangement of the senses,” pushing the boundaries of his identity, annihilating the ego, and greatly influencing his writing in the process. During this time he also continued his exploration of magic.

Before delving into a complex work like the *The Invisibles*, it is important to address two foundational lynchpins of the series: Morrison's magical practice and the Kathmandu experience. *The Invisibles* was initially conceived as a comic which would encapsulate all of Morrison's interests at the time in the form of a "time-traveling, sexy assassins" story. Before he started writing the comic, he decided that it could be much more significant. Sure, he could write an engaging occult/conspiracy thriller, but he opted instead to send out a viral message with the potential to bring about both personal and cultural change; however, at the start of the comic, he did not yet know what that message was: "Having set this up, I wanted people to keep reading. I had to promise revelations, and so I promised the Secret of the Universe—not quite sure what I was going to deliver but certain I'd figure it out" (*Supergods* 259). He then booked a flight to New Zealand with the intention of bungee jumping off of a bridge. As he stood at the edge, clutching a small piece of paper, the bungee coordinator asked Morrison what he did for a living. When Morrison responded by saying that he was a writer, unable to say much more from the abject terror, the man said, "Well, this'll give you something to write about, mate." As he gravity pulled him toward the earth, at the very highest peak of rush and terror, he let go of the piece of paper before the rope snapped him up away from the earth. On the piece of paper was a *sigil* Morrison had designed to launch the project (259).

Morrison's practice of magic falls under the current known as "chaos magick," a postmodern approach to magic that strips away the heavy symbolism of previous antiquated systems in favor of practicality and results. The current gained traction during the punk rock boom of the late seventies and into the eighties with much of its

foundational literature consisting of Peter Carroll's *Liber Null*, Ray Sherwin's *Book of Results*, and Phil Hine's numerous works on the subject. The chaos current eschews dogma and "utilizes systems and encourages adherents to devise their own, giving magic a truly Postmodernist flavor" (*Oven-Ready* 10). With the chaos approach, belief is a tool, the catalyst for any magical or spiritual work to have any efficacy. There is also the notion of the paradigm shift, where the magician has the option to shift his or her practice from different spiritual systems with the final goal being the construction of a personally viable belief system (*Oven-Ready*).

The idea of the sigil is one that has been around for perhaps thousands of years, perhaps even going back as far as shamanic cave paintings. The modern conceptualization of the sigil as implemented by the chaos magicians comes from the writings of London-based artist and magician Austin Osman Spare in the early twentieth century. Spare believed that the subconscious was the true reservoir of magic and that the only way to bypass the conscious mind was to somehow imprint a visual condensation of desire into the subconscious (as the subconscious has a more visceral connection with images) in order for the desire to be made manifest in the magician's life. The most common method used in the construction of a sigil is to write a phrase of desire, remove the vowels and/or repeated letters, and construct a symbol out of the remaining letters. While the method for creating sigils varies, the main goal is to condense intent into a form of abstraction such as a symbol, mantra, song, etc. The sigil is then activated in an altered state of consciousness (31-34). Morrison, having experimented with sigil magic for quite some time, had never considered a synthesis with his favorite medium until *The Invisibles*. He refers to his extension of the sigil as a "hypersigil." With *The Invisibles*, his

approach was “to extend the sigil concept into areas of plot and narrative, and to extend that sentence [of desire] into a kind of fractal, six-year project” (Meaney 297). Morrison initially based King Mob on himself but decided to actually become the character in order to add a new dimension to the hypersigil like a veritable method-writer. Even though this empowered Morrison to experience the world, it would take a darker turn when Morrison wrote a torture sequence for his avatar. Discussing the efficacy of a sigil would be akin to discussing the efficacy of a prayer; however, *The Invisibles* was not only designed to be a gnostic artifact which had the potential to liberate the minds of readers, but it was also an attempt for Morrison to rewrite himself both as a person and as a writer. Did Morrison truly cause change in the cultural current? This question is not the concern of this essay. It is the ability of art to invoke a deeper understanding of oneself and the universe, a working between the artist and the reader, which will be explored here.

Although the infamous Kathmandu experience occurred after he had written the first couple of issues, it is a key to decoding the dense text of *The Invisibles*. Morrison and a friend of his were watching a BBC documentary that charted the journeys of Buddha throughout his life; one of these destinations was Kathmandu. In the documentary, the host pointed out a temple, saying that according to legend if one were to ascend the 365 steps with a single breath, he or she would achieve enlightenment. Morrison was on a plane to Kathmandu soon thereafter. He successfully ascended the steps with surprising ease and eventually retired to the Vajra hotel. Sitting atop the rooftop, writing an issue of *The Invisibles*, he noticed one of the temples in the distance transform itself via hidden mechanisms like a machine awakening. Assuming that the hashish he had ingested earlier may have gotten to him a little too much, he went to bed.

As he lay down, silvery, mercurial beings came out of the walls. After explaining that he had been chosen, these beings asked him where he would like to go. Without much thought, his answer was Alpha Centauri. Morrison further describes the scene as him being lifted out of time into the fifth dimension. The messengers explained that they were allowing him to see the entirety of mankind without the distinction of time, in which every living being was connected in a vast biological matrix. With the veil of time lifted, Morrison glimpsed “Shakespeare scribbling *King Lear* on one wrinkled fold, and just around the corner from him, forever out of his line of sight, was the Cretaceous period and tyrannosaurs padding past his wife [Anne Hathaway]” (*Supergods* 273). They explained that this vastly complex lifeform was a “child” which could only grow within the confines of space time as all things need time to grow and change. The beings tasked Morrison with the duties of “midwife” to the developing consciousness of this life form, “to make certain it didn’t panic or struggle too much when it woke up to its true nature as a singular life form” (274). Morrison was then promptly returned to his body, which he describes as a “fall from heaven” (274).

He sought an explanation following this transformative event. The hash was not potent enough of a drug to elicit that type of a hallucinatory experience, so what really happened to Morrison on that rooftop? He has since considered many theories, ranging from what some occultists refer to as the knowledge and conversation of the Holy Guardian Angel to the physiological conclusion of temporal lobe epilepsy, which has been linked to religious experience. Morrison, being more spiritually and philosophically flexible than most, has since summed it up as a nervous system experience that has changed his perspective on art and the universe to such a degree that the actual trigger is

irrelevant; the result was transformative. Just as Blake saw God's head at the window, Morrison's gnostic experience allowed him to see infinity in all things—to see God. Looking at life through such a lens allowed the most trivial thing to become incredibly significant. As Morrison puts it, “an atom of iron in your body might once have spilled from the brow of Jesus Christ” (275).

The Invisibles is a globe-trotting, psychedelic, fashion-conscious, action-packed, occult-laden, and mind-bending piece of work that tells of a battle between the rebel forces that desire independence and freedom, The Invisibles, and the Gnostic demiurge forces that desire authoritarian control of mind and body, The Outer Church. This description, intriguing though it may be, does not even touch upon the liberating philosophies Morrison has both encoded and made obvious throughout the series. The series consists of three volumes, each with a particular style. The first volume consists of *Say You Want a Revolution*, *Apocalipstick*, and *Entropy in the U.K.*; the second volume consists of *Bloody Hell in America*, *Counting to None*, and *Kissing Mister Quimper*; and the third volume is collected in *The Invisible Kingdom*. Because of the complexity and scope of the series, summary will only be used where it is necessary as a detailed summarizing of a complex work approaching 1,500 pages would be ludicrous; instead, what follows is an examination of key scenes and overarching concepts. King Mob's monologue in the last issue of the series, “Glitterdammerung,” describes the experience of this complex narrative quite well: “It's ragged at the edges but you can play any of 300 characters, some more involving than others. It's a thriller, it's a romance, it's a tragedy, it's a porno, it's neo-modernist kitchen sink science fiction that you *catch*, like a cold” (*Kingdom* 272).

The Invisibles is a global rebel organization comprised of group cells each consisting of five members that seek to defend humanity from the malignant grasp of the demiurge forces of the Outer Church, which seeks to enslave humanity in every aspect of their being. The cell most prominent in the comic consists of the following: Dane McGowan, or Jack Frost, a Liverpool punk destined to be the next Buddha whose initiation into the cell occurs throughout the series; Boy, an ex-cop from Harlem proficient in martial arts; Lord Fanny, a Brazilian transvestite shaman, whose power is only surpassed by her extravagance; Ragged Robin, a mysterious psychic from the future whose real purpose is explained in later issues; and King Mob, an adept assassin and master of the occult who is quite frankly Morrison himself on ink and paper. Morrison constructed the cell as a collective of personal archetypes: Dane, “the working class cynic that kept [him] in check; King Mob, the art-school fashion-conscious chaos magician.” Ragged Robin; his “sensible anima;” Lord Fanny, his “indomitable tranny witch disguise; and Boy, his “pragmatic voice of reason” (258).

Initiation

Phil Hine, a key contributor to the chaos current and a significant influence on Morrison, wrote the following on initiation: “The initiatory cycle can be likened to a snake sloughing off its skin. So too, we must be prepared to slough off old patterns of thought, belief (about ourselves and the world) and behavior that are no longer appropriate for the new phase of our development” (“Illuminated” 57). He criticizes those who claim to be initiates and put themselves on a pedestal, unwilling to divulge any secrets or words of wisdom to the uninitiated. Setting aside this elitist view, Hine instead insists that initiation is an ongoing process for the shaman/magician regardless of caliber,

with illumination, or gnosis, being the most sought-after result (52). Morrison's countercultural opus was designed to be an initiatory experience on the page, designed so that anyone reading the comic could become an Invisible. The inherently immersive and participatory nature of the comic medium as discussed above lends itself well to the process of initiation. Morrison is quite aware of the medium's efficacy in bringing the reader into the creative process when he says, "How do you imbue an ink mark with feeling? What happens? The feeling only appears when the consciousness of the readers comes in and a hologram is formed between the creator [and] the reader, with the comic book in the middle" (Meaney 306). Even though *The Invisibles* features an incredible cast of characters, readers are more likely, at least on the outset of the series, to experience the story through the character of Dane McGowan. While the focus on Dane diminishes in some of the later volumes, his initiation into the Invisibles is a central narrative thread that runs throughout the series. Upon the first reading, the reader will naturally want to find a character to act as the narrative's fulcrum. Since many readers approach *The Invisibles* with its controversial reputation in mind, the need for them to find stable footing in this narrative world is to be expected. Dane is the central character—an icon—upon which the reader will project his or herself in order to experience the story.

Since the theme of gnosis is intertwined with multiple facets of this comic—Morrison, the comic itself, and the reader—charting the path of a single character can gain incredible insight into the messages within the series. "Down and Out in Heaven and Hell," comprised of three issues, is when Dane's initiation begins. A seemingly mad homeless man who refers to himself as Tom O'Bedlam protects him from pursuing policemen by using magic, making Dane invisible, an obvious nod to Tom's purpose,

leading Dane on the path to becoming an Invisible. Thus begins Dane's initiation into the powers that lie underneath the thin veneer of reality. Tom is a veteran Invisible working with King Mob's cell in order to bring Dane into the fold. One of the first lessons Tom imparts onto Dane is the nature of reality. After taking him to the London underground, he and Dane smoke a blue mold which seems to trigger a hallucinogenic journey within an alternative London; later, Dane and the reader discover that the blue mold was merely a placebo meant to trigger his dormant powers. In this alternative London, blimps are in transit above the city in cliché fashion, Big Ben is facing the wrong direction, strange characters inhabit the streets, and a statue of Blake's Urizen towers from the depths of the Thames. Dane is of course reluctant to accept any of this as reality. Tom challenges Dane's notions of the real world when he says, "You don't think this world is any less real than the one you left, do you? Everything that ever happened to you is real, even your dreams. Them, most of all" (*Revolution* 68).

This view of reality is prominent throughout the series, as the boundary between fiction and reality—for the characters and Morrison himself—becomes less and less divisive. In one scene, Dane and Tom are walking in a park until they reach a flock of pigeons on the ground, and Dane attempts to kick one of the birds. Tom compares the pigeons to the Invisibles, referring to them as "invisible animals . . . overlooked and despised . . . Nobody sees there comings and goings" (80). He then forces Dane to view the world from the eyes of one of the birds in order to garner respect for life that had been lacking in his punk, nihilistic paradigm. While Tom tells Dane that this is his last lesson, he later catches him unawares with a rather harsh and violent encounter. Out of this encounter comes a monologue which sums up the purpose of the Invisibles quite well:

Your head's like mine, like all our heads; big enough to contain every god and devil there ever was. Big enough to hold the weight of oceans and the turning stars. Whole universes fit in there! . . . But what do we choose to keep in this miraculous cabinet? Little broken things, sad trinkets that we play with over and over. The world turns our key and we play the same little tune again and again and we think that tune's all we are. (93)

This is Morrison talking to the reader through the medium of the comic page, addressing the limitations that society has written into its source code, propagating a materialistic culture that has turned a blind eye to the liberating faculties of the human imagination. The last sentence echoes Blake's "There is No Natural Religion" in which he says in the conclusion, "If it were not for the Poetic or Prophetic character the Philosophic & Experimental would soon be at the ratio of all things & stand still, unable to do other than repeat the *same dull round over again*" (my italics *CPP* 3). Soon after this scene, Dane has his first encounter with Barbelith, a mysterious satellite that appears as a red disk suspended in space, one of the most important elements of the series. Its presence marks a crucible of individual characters on their journey toward the Supercontext, an apocalyptic event in which humanity enters the next stage of evolution.

The "Arcadia" storyline (1995) that immediately follows "Down and Out in Heaven and Hell" almost killed the series. What was shaping up to be an engaging and complex work became even more cerebral, turning some readers away from the comic. This is when Morrison began to process the Kathmandu experience in the narrative itself. On a first reading, "Arcadia" can be a lot to process, but it plants seeds within the comic that reach fruition in the final issues of the series. While the main plot of the arc follows the Invisibles' mission of recruiting a psychic projection of the Marquis de Sade from the past into their cause, there is also a narrative thread that follows a dialogue between Lord

Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley, who are revealed to be Invisibles. Morrison's leanings toward Romanticism and the era's revolutionary ideologies are given voice in what is one of the series' most philosophically potent storylines. Byron and Shelley are drifting about Venice, discussing the potentiality of art to inspire revolution in both society and the individual. Byron appears to be jaded about the efficacy of art in the presence of governing bodies, while Shelley champions it. "But our poetry will outlive them, George. A cannon fires only once but words detonate across centuries" (127). When Shelley brings up the topic of utopia, Byron retorts, saying that such fictions are inherently built from suffering and ultimately doomed to fail. Shelley's riposte is that utopia lies in the imagination of divine potential. "The greatest lunacy is to believe in a creator, George. By doing so, we deny our *own* divinity. Broken to the yoke of religion, we forget who made our burden and set it upon us." Shelley proposes a break from the closed circuit logic of the human mind and a reclamation of the divine self: "Gods and devils make terrible infants of us all. We must do away with them and stand up tall, be all that we dream of happy, high, majestic" (128). Bearing a message that echoes to the very last page of the series, this dialogue plays off of Tom's monologue quite well. Hundreds of years apart, by the turn of a couple of pages, the message is the same: free the mind.

Breaking the Binary

In the beginning of the series, the conflict between the Invisibles and the Outer Church is perceived as being strictly Manichean: good versus evil. Before the events of the series unfold, the Invisibles are simply fighting the opposing forces because it seems like the natural response to the anti-being presence of the Outer Church. They must be subversive to survive, nothing more. But where are the strings and where does it end?

The true machinations of this battle are unknown, albeit to a select few characters who have transcended the dimensions of reality and have seen the world as Morrison saw it during the Kathmandu experience: as singular entity rather than opposing forces. When Robin meets Satan during the “Arcadia” arc, he is playing chess with the simplistic color configuration of black and white. A closer look reveals him sitting adjacent to the board rather than the side with the black pieces as one would be quick to assume. This is a very slight detail on Morrison’s part, a suggestion that the binary perspective is inherently flawed.

Despite being the newest member of the Invisibles, Dane is the first to catch a glimpse at the truth of this conflict. When the Invisibles rescue King Mob from the tortures of Sir Miles, one of the Outer Church’s top agents, Dane squares off directly with the King of All-Tears, an Archon of the Outer Church. In the issue “The Last Temptation of Jack,” when he faces off against the monstrosity that would drive most people insane by a mere glance, Dane sits in the lotus position and engages in a mental battle of will. The Archon attempts to remove Dane from the playing field because he is the key to the resistance. Instead of resorting to physical attacks, the abomination brings up a slew of thoughts and memories which include a previous relationship that ended tragically, the first man Dane killed, and ascension to a heavenly plane. It is this last episode that is interesting as the enemy actually granted Dane entrance to nirvana. What better way to remove a key player than by granting his greatest desire? As Dane starts to become acclimated to the transcendent bliss, Barbelith warns him that his destiny has not yet been played out and that he must return. Barbelith briefly assumes the form of Christ and says, “I am not the God of your fathers. I am the hidden stone that breaks all hearts. Break

open your heart. Come from below. Rise unto the heights, descend again with knowledge” (*Entropy* 189). Dane turns away from paradise like the goddess Quanyin, like Jesus returning from his encounter with Satan in the desert, with purpose and resolve. During the rescue mission, King Mob tears away Sir Miles’s aura, making him vulnerable to all manner of malevolent forces. Dane, however, uses his newfound power to rejuvenate Miles’s aura, directly contradicting the binary view of the oppositional forces of the universe.

Morrison actually encountered the Gnostic Christ. As mentioned earlier, Morrison embodied the character of King Mob in order to further invest himself into the world of the comic, bridging the gap between fiction and reality. When he wrote King Mob’s torture by Sir Miles, who uses a serum which causes linguistic suggestion to physically manifest in the way of a flesh-eating virus, Morrison ended up in the hospital with a collapsed lung and an infection eating away at his face. Whether it was sympathetic magic or mere synchronicity, the stakes of the hypersigil were raised. In a hallucinatory daze, Morrison saw the Christ figure bearing the same message as that said to Dane. One could look at the entire *Invisibles* run as Morrison’s diary of the nineties, fashioned in fiction.

This is How the World Ends...

Barbelith is an enigmatic constant throughout the series. It is an *icon* which encapsulates the idea of gnosis, appearing in the guise of that which the individual projects upon it. In its most basic form, it takes the shape of a red circle. This persistent icon, clearly related to the blank badge that signifies an Invisible, is present throughout

the entire *Invisibles* run. Every member of the Invisibles cell goes through a crucible which results in an encounter with this enigmatic entity and an understanding of their role in the cosmic battle. Dane sees it in one instance as an almost stereotypical alien intelligence and, in another, as Christ. This artifact is mutable, able to adapt to the nervous systems and predilections of any individual. During a conversation with Mason, King Mob shares his, and Morrison's, view on this unique nervous system event: "A kind of ego annihilation is followed by euphoric reintegration and a sense of extended understanding . . . a surge of creative energy . . . a new relationship with time, the self, and death" (*Invisible Kingdom* 129). This explanation explains the illumination of past figures from Christ, to Blake, and to Morrison himself. Its endgame becomes clearer as more characters interact with it. In summation, the purpose of this icon within the narrative is to punctuate humanity's time on the current plane as it transcends into the fifth-dimension.

In the series' final issue, "Glitterdammerung," Dane has spent over a decade recruiting his own Invisibles crew and continuing its subversive ops, but the world is a much different place. The symbol and the symbolized are becoming the same. Technology exists to transcend the individual in the form of the MemePlex, which is described as "multiple personality disorder as a lifestyle option" (*Invisible Kingdom* 270). Here, the root of conflict, the opposition of differences, is broken down into a fractal abyss. Dane and his recruit, Reynard, infiltrate the headquarters of the company responsible, Technocult. When they reach the main offices, they encounter King Mob, the CEO, who explains that the company has used its considerable resources to fund subversive activity around the world. The goal behind Technocult was to use

international resources such as the media to prepare humanity for its transition into the Supercontext, the apocalyptic next step in human evolution. An ad describes it as such: “The world turns inside out. You identify with everything in the universe that is not-self and dissolve the existential alienation dilemma in unity. All is one and several is none” (271). To help facilitate this, King Mob designed an interactive video game in aerosol form called “The Invisibles,” initiation in a can. Turning the comic in the reader’s hands into a meta-narrative in the comics is not only a flair of postmodernism, it is Morrison addressing his readership, telling them that what they are holding in their hands is designed for the same exact purpose as the Invisibles-in-a-can albeit on the microcosmic scale.

When the King of All Tears arrives for the finale, King Mob arms himself for the first time in eleven years and marches out to face the demiurge. Years previously, when the Invisibles team thwarted the British aristocracy’s attempt at ushering in the Archons into the world, the King of All Tears was dosed with a similar drug to what Sir Miles used in torturing King Mob. The word becomes the real. King Mob squares off against the demiurge and says, “Welcome to the **word**. And a bullet in the right place...is no substitute for the **real** thing.” When he pulls the trigger a flag with the word “Pop!” comes out, obliterating the King with abstraction made lethal and potent. Curiously enough, the demise of the demiurge is described as “the Supercontext absorb[ing] the king effortlessly, welcoming his quaint ferocity, converting it to *narrative*” (my italics). This monster, representing the demons of mankind i.e. the restrictive forces that eat away at our soul and possibility, is defeated using the power of language. The successive panels on the same page depict Barbelith, now a satellite in orbit around the Earth. As an

astronaut approaches the icon, blocks of text address the reader: “Listen to this voice closely. Who is speaking? Whose voice is this speaking in your head and reminding you that you are free?” (281). While Meaney interprets the text as Morrison stepping outside of character to address the reader. One must keep in mind: whose voice does the reader hear while reading a text?

As mentioned above, Morrison believes that the comics allows for an integrative experience between the reader and the creator which he describes as “holographic.”

Describing her transactional theory of literature, Louise Rosenblatt writes:

A story or poem or play is merely inkspots on paper until a reader transforms them into a set of meaningful symbols. When these symbols lead us to live through some moment of feeling, to enter into some human personality or to participate in some situation or event, we have evoked a work of literary art. (62-63)

While Rosenblatt developed this theory in regards to the reader’s interaction with written literature, her observation is quite applicable to the visual/verbal medium.

In the last two pages of the series, the fourth wall is abandoned (courtesy of the Supercontext?) while Dane, the reader’s iconic vehicle throughout the entire series, addresses the reader moments before ascending to the Supercontext. He quotes King Mob’s mentor: “We made gods and jailers because we felt small and ashamed and alone...we let them try us and judge us and, like sheep to slaughter, we allowed ourselves to be...**sentenced**. See! Now! Our sentence is up” (286). This is the conclusion of Morrison’s hypersigil, but the story is not over. The reader may set the comic down and walk away, but they are only venturing out into a story that has yet to be told, the grandest narrative of all.

The Serpent and the Moon: Alan Moore and *Promethea*

A retrospective of Moore's work reveals two very different writers: the postmodernist comics auteur who elevated the medium to a literary status and the shaman-like figure whose mid-life spiritual awakening shaped him and his art thereafter. Moore's breakthrough in the comics industry occurred in the eighties beginning with his turn on *Swamp Thing* (1984-1987), in which he turned a horror comic about a gruesome transformation into an examination of humanity's troubled relationship with its own ecosystem. *Watchmen* (1986-1987), a complete deconstruction of the superhero and vigilantism which left the pieces lying in the gutter of pop culture, established Moore not only as a master of the medium but as one of the best British writers of the twentieth century. Moore's pre-magus works often took a hard atheistic philosophical stance in which clashes considerably with his current magical views of the world; however, there are moments in Moore's earlier works which in a sense foreshadow his transition. The titular character of *Swamp Thing* could be compared to previous pagan gods of antiquity tied inextricably with nature; the eponymous Green Man is a more poignant example. John Constantine, the blue-collar occultist detective of *Hellblazer* first introduced in *Swamp Thing*, stands out as one of the most iconic characters in comics with occult ties. Dr. Manhattan, the god-like being in *Watchmen*, offers a prelude to Moore's future postulations on the nature of time and higher dimensions.

Two transitional works act as the bridge between the cynic and the magus: Moore's debut novel *Voice of the Fire* (1996) and the grisly yet insightful dissection of Victorian culture *From Hell* (1989-1996). Both of these works were commenced with the atheistic cynicism attributed to Moore's past work and finished with a fresh spiritual

perspective. The former is a work of literary shamanism, a fourth-dimensional excavation of the town of Northampton where Moore has lived his entire life. Each chapter takes the point of view of past inhabitants of the town going as far back as 4,000 B.C. into the mind of a simple-minded cave-boy with a fifty-word vocabulary unable to discern between waking life and the dream world and culminating with Moore himself upon typing the last sentence of the previous chapter. As in *From Hell*, his psycho-geographical interests are played out in the novel as place becomes a palimpsest of historical and spiritual significance. In the final chapter, "Phipps' Fire Escape," Moore responds to an inquiry on his novel with the following internal dialogue:

It's about the vital message that the stiff lips of decapitated men still shape; the testament of black and spectral dogs written in piss across our bad dreams. It's about raising the dead to tell us what they know. It is a bridge, a crossing-point, a worn spot in the curtain between our world and the underworld, between the mortar and the myth, fact and fiction, a threadbare gauze no thicker than a page. It's about the powerful glossolalia of witches and their magical revision of the texts we live in. None of this is speakable. (*Voice* 302)

This is the manifesto of a veritable shaman whose initiation remains fresh and prevalent on his mind and a promise of more to come.

Over five-hundred pages in length, *From Hell* is a massive tome of a graphic novel dense with research and concept. On one level, it functions as a fictional postulation on the Jack the Ripper murders that captivated Victorian society; on another, it examines the birth of the twentieth century; even further, it is an examination of one man's attempt to maintain male hegemony via a blood sacrifice on the altar of London itself. What is interesting about this work from the perspective of spirituality is how one can glean fascinating insight from the truly monstrous individual of William Gull despite

his bloodthirst and fear of the feminine. In the fourth chapter, Gull takes his illiterate coachman Netley on a tour of London, highlighting the historical and spiritual significance that lies under and within the familiar structures. During a lunch break, Netley asks what all of the mythology has to do with Gull's mission. Gull replies by saying, "Scorn not the Gods: Despite their non-existence in material terms; they're no less potent, no less terrible. The one place Gods inarguably exist is in our minds where they are real beyond refute, in all their grandeur and monstrosity" (*From Hell* Chapter Four 18). Immediately upon writing this response, Moore realized that he had made a true statement and, instead of completely ignoring this realization, opted for reframing his entire mindset around it (Campbell).

On his fortieth birthday in 1993, Moore declared himself a magician without any clear idea of exactly what that entailed or how one should act upon it. It is important to mention his near lifelong friendship with the late Steve Moore (no relation) in discussing his spiritual and artistic growth since he was responsible for turning Alan Moore onto comics and specifically comics writing, and thereby directly responsible for the latter's early career trajectory and eventual rise to fame. When the fledgling magus found himself at a complete lost as to how he should proceed, he turned to his old friend for guidance. Steve Moore had been a devoted follower of the moon goddess Selene in a spiritual practice involving ritual and dream-work, and his first advice to Alan Moore was to find his Selene, some deity with whom he could embark on this transformative endeavor (*Campbell*).

On entirely unrelated terms, Steve showed Moore a picture of the only known statuary of Glycon, a second-century Roman snake god whose only reference in the

annals of history are courtesy of the historian Lucian, who asserted that the serpentine god was a glove-puppet hoax propagated by the False Prophet Alexander. Initially unaware of this background, Moore became fascinated by the deity for purely aesthetic reasons; it simply looked interesting. On the spot, he declared his worship of this mysterious serpent. Moore later learned of Lucian's less-than-favorable account of the deity, which only strengthened his relationship with the icon. Moore believes that all gods and goddesses of antiquity are "stories, or at least the ideas behind stories, but stories and ideas . . . [are] almost alive and aware, or at least appear to be in all practical intents and purposes. The idea of a god . . . is the god" (Campbell). This is a rather radical position from which to view adoration for the divine as it entirely circumvents the inevitable accusations of falsity. Perhaps one of Moore's strongest beliefs lies in the creative process in all its splendor and magnitude. If a false prophet creates a divine icon based on benevolent precepts and decides to use trickery or harmless manipulation to spread the idea to the masses, Moore believes that this is simply a means to an end and not an opportunity for more flammable candidates to be added to the hegemony's hit-list.

Moore's entire perspective on magic seems to stem from a fascination with the creative process i.e. creating something out of nothing. He defines magic as "the science of manipulating symbols—words or images—to achieve changes in consciousness" i.e. the awareness of the self and the universe (*Mindscape*). It is only fitting that Moore would orient his magical perspective around the framework of art considering his profession and proclivities. Magical practice, as posited earlier in this thesis, is inherently multimodal; it utilizes various forms of art in the cultivation and mediation of spiritual experience. With that in mind, Moore's equating of magic and art bears some validity and

is the key to understanding both his spiritual practice and his creative process post-magus. While not being a complete adherent to Crowley's magical system, Thelema, Moore often cites the controversial occultist in his discussion of magic, and he appears to be a seminal and distinctive influence on him. In his *Magick in Theory and Practice*, Crowley defines magic as "the Science and Art of causing change to occur in conformity to Will" (Crowley xii). To illustrate this definition, Crowley says the following:

It is my Will to inform the World of certain facts within my knowledge. I therefore take "magical weapons," pen, ink, and paper; I write "incantations"—these sentences—in the "magical language" *i.e.* that which is understood by the people I wish to instruct; I call forth "spirits," such as printers, publishers, booksellers, and so forth, and constrain them to convey my message to those people. The composition and distribution of this book is thus an act of magick. (xiii)

Crowley's definitions of magic are numerous as they were intended to incorporate the magical viewpoint into the numerous facets of one's life. However, the above definition, which Moore undoubtedly would have read, may have influenced Moore's coupling of magic and art. If that is not the case, then such parallels only goes to show how these two concepts are related even in a matter of semantics. According to Moore, "an artist or writer is the closest thing that you are likely to see in the contemporary world to a shaman" (*Mindscape*). Moore's respect for the power of writers may eclipse that of any past magus when he says only half-jokingly that although a magician may put a "curse" upon someone, resulting in nothing more than mere encumbrances, a bard may put a "satire" on an individual, possibly destroying him or her in the eyes of all for decades, possibly centuries (*Mindscape*).

Like many thinkers before him, Moore has attempted to establish a framework around consciousness, a response to perhaps the most pervasive question in regards to the

creative individual: “Where do you get your ideas from?” In some magical schools of thought, there is the concept of the Astral Plane, which is essentially a space/state of high imagination in which all manner of beings or ideas can be interacted with and experienced. Moore, however, does not wish to keep his concept of consciousness entirely within the realm of magical operations; his approach to conceptualizing it is rather simple. There is a tendency to think of the mind in terms of space or geography. Something is at the *back* of our minds or at the *top* of our heads or *crosses* the mind. This habit of thinking of mind in such terms led Moore to hypothesize an actual mental space in which certain areas are designated to the individual, but, as with the physical property on which a person lives, venturing out to other areas is possible. This Ideospace, as Moore calls it, would feature the visual manifestations of what are otherwise intangible in the real world. For example, entire religions, philosophies, and any other fictions of considerable magnitude may be continents in this space (Campbell). Like Jung’s collective unconscious, Moore’s Ideospace is omnipresent, an inner space for introspective endeavors.

Voice of the Fire and *From Hell* were both written during a transitional period for Moore, so while mystical ideas may have seeped into the work in some form or fashion, they were not initially conceived as such. Moore’s first foray into magic and spiritual-centric art took the form of multimodal performance pieces consisting of spoken word, music, dance, and numerous other media in unison. In the writer’s mind, a multimodal approach to conveying magical ideas is not only effective but natural as it has been done before by Crowley and Dr. John Dee in *Rites of Eleusis* and opera respectively (Campbell). The multimodal construction allows the artist/magus to saturate the

audience's perceptions with image, word, and sound in order to create a truly psychedelic experience. The "troupe" at the center of these performances was dubbed by Moore "The Moon and Serpent Grand Egyptian Theatre of Marvels," a magical organization which he humorously describes as "a perfect example of a magical organization in that it doesn't actually exist, or have any members" (Campbell); he conceived the idea of this eccentric troupe between his declaring himself a magician on November 14, 1994 and his ritual experience with Steve Moore which cemented his beliefs in January 7th the following year. These unique performances are the most personal in all of Moore's oeuvre as they enabled the writer to truly synthesize his newfound spirituality with his art, transcending the model of a mere comics writer. These performances dealt with a variety of topics while maintaining a mystical baseline; *The Birth Caul* was a shamanic retrospective of his own childhood, and *Angel Passage* was a grand ode to the vision of William Blake in celebration of his life and influence.

Snakes and Ladders was performed in London at Red Lion Square on April 10, 1999. Eddie Campbell, who collaborated with Moore on *From Hell*, created a beautiful graphic novelization of this one-time-only performance which effectively compliments the stream of conscious prose-poetry of Moore with equally engaging art. Beginning with Moore's proclivity for psycho-geographical excavation of place, the piece moves toward the extraordinary mystical experiences of fantasy author Arthur Machen after the death of his wife. The rest of the performance shifts from the mundane world of reality and the higher realm of concept as Machen's predicament and gnostic experiences are complimented with more grand, ethereal musings on the role of imagination in life and the universe.

In the section titled “Stars and Garters,” the reader/audience is presented with Moore’s observations on the twenty-second card of the Major Arcana of the Thoth tarot, The Universe, and its incredible significance to the individual and the entire human species for that matter. The card depicts a celestial woman dancing with a serpent surrounded by Zodiacal symbolism among others. In a dazzling sequence of images, Campbell depicts the graceful movements that would have been the dancer’s time to shine during the performance as the Goddess figure and the snake intertwine in true freeform expression. Moore describes the moonlit Goddess figure as “life’s sole partner in this waltz of being, yet she is imaginary. More than this, she is imagination, the most beautiful and splendid partner we could ever need; could ever hope for” (Campbell). The serpent is the reader, or any individual, who has inevitably become acquainted with fantasy, with imagination. Being the product of a serpentine, double-helix DNA, mankind is forever in a dance with the abstract. This part of the performance was the precursor to Moore’s first occult-centric comic, *Promethea*.

Who is Promethea?

From the beginning of its inception, *Promethea* was designed from the ground up to be a comic that could effectively convey magical ideas to an audience that would otherwise be unaware of such philosophies, all the while maintaining the superheroine accoutrements that readers expect out of a comic. The narrative follows college student Sophie Bangs as she discovers that the ubiquitous mythic character whom she has been researching for her term paper is actually a demi-Goddess who throughout the centuries has manifested in avatars largely consisting of artists or writers of some ilk. After invoking the Promethea spirit via poetry in order to defend herself and a previous vessel

against a shadowy assailant, she embarks on a long journey toward illumination that pits her against enemies who are threatened by what she symbolizes: the liberation of the mind through its already inherent faculties of imagination. Like Blake's Eternal Artist Los, the creative aspect of mankind deified, Moore has created in front of the reader's eyes a Goddess figure that all people of all walks of life can relate to. She is a benevolent force that only means the best for humanity, and she is fiction, the apotheosis of the imagination. Moore fashioned an icon which the reader, if he or she chooses, can experience and interact with much like a devotee would do in spiritual practice. She is the icon which the reader imbues with life and meaning, and when all is said and done, she thanks the reader for his or her time. Here lies a clever parallel between Moore and the False Prophet Alexander: both, using the materials at their disposal, created a fictitious divine entity in the hopes of spreading ideas that could only benefit society.

Promethea is very much in the same vein as *The Invisibles* in that they are both initiation narratives designed from every aspect to incorporate the reader into the comic. At a single glance, one can see that Moore benefited from only working with a single art team: J. H. Williams III on pencils and layout and Mick Gray on ink; Morrison, while he may have worked with some of the best artists in the business, did not have the creative control which Moore has here since *The Invisibles* circulated different artists during its run. The result is nothing short of amazing as Williams is undoubtedly one of the most talented and innovative comics artists working today; his desire to transcend the traditional grid-panel layout opened up a whole new realm of possibilities of ink on paper. Here, closure demands more from the reader as each and every page is constructed without the simplicity of panels in favor of layouts which in themselves add considerable

depth to the visual components of the comic, all the while enhancing the readers' experience. Williams's skillset, coupled with Moore's vision, guides the reader on a psychedelic journey into space both inner and outer, the microcosm and the macrocosm. Sophie Bangs/Promethea is undoubtedly the *iconic* figure with whom the reader will vicariously experience the narrative as she is presented with a plethora of magical ideas from a position of relative ignorance much like the reader. Sophie's initiation is the reader's initiation. Like Dane in *The Invisibles*, Sophie/Promethea is the character that acts as the reader's avatar through the unknown terrain of the narrative, and this terrain is nothing short of extraordinary.

While it may be much shorter in length than *The Invisibles*, a detailed summary of *Promethea* is not necessary; however, there are some key moments on Sophie's path to illumination, and consequently mankind's, that are necessary for thematic emphases and for analyzing the medium being put to incredible use.

Initiation

After her first invocation of Promethea and introduction to the Immaterialia (Moore's Ideospace), Sophie's first lesson is to learn the four elements and their significance, which are also the four weapons of the magician or the four essential human qualities: water, air, earth, and fire; or the cup, the sword, the coin, and wand; or compassion, reason, earthly matters, and Will. When Sophie/Promethea learns water/cups/compassion she is mentored by a previous incarnation of Promethea named Margaret who rescued and comforted soldiers on the horrific battlefields of World War I. She asserts that Promethea is very prevalent in matters of warfare, as "all war, and

conflict, is naught but the failure of imagination.” In this tutelage concerning compassion, Sophie learns of Promethea’s role in the world and her duty to bring about the Apocalypse, which Margaret refers to as the next “Devonian leap, from sea to land . . . from matter . . . to mind” (*Book One*). Instead of the apocalypse being a physical devastation of the world, the end of the world refers to the end of the world which humanity has structured around itself. The apocalyptic conclusion of the comic will be addressed later. Next, Promethea learns of air/sword/reason from one of the most militant Prometheas, Grace Brannagh, who lived and fought her way through numerous pulp works in the twenties. She teaches Sophie that “swords stand for reason and discrimination. Frankly, dear, they cut through bullshit.” Next, Sophie meets Bill, a comic book artist who once invoked Promethea and started a romance with an FBI agent that turned to tragedy when he discovered Promethea’s male identity. Here, Bill teaches Sophie the importance of the coin, or pentacle, which represents matters pertaining to the mundane world. In one sequence, the characters become real in the sense that they are depicted in photography rather than a cartoon style; this is to ground Sophie and the reader into the mundane world. Knowledge of the wand, representing Will, is put to the test in defense against the Goetia, a hierarchy of demons hired by an organization known only as the Temple to assassinate Sophie before her destiny comes to fruition. What makes the above lessons important in discussing the comic as a potentially gnostic artifact is that they are not communicated solely for the benefit of the character; more importantly, they are for the reader to ponder and contemplate and hopefully utilize. These are the weapons, or the tools, Sophie will use on her journey, but, more importantly, so too will the reader in his or her own life.

Promethea was praised for its masterful artwork and design courtesy of Williams, but received much negative criticism on the part of Moore's rather sharp turn toward the didactic and expository dialogue. In regards to the series' layout, Moore originally did not intend to abandon the mainstream superhero concept in favor of a more didactic narrative; the goal was "to start at the shallow end, with inflatable armbands, so as not to alienate the readership from the very outset (the plan was to wait about twelve issues and then alienate them)" (Campbell). It appears as if the desire for conveyance had overridden subtlety as Moore felt confined within the traditional superhero narrative and opted to abandon it altogether. Magical concepts were moderately incorporated into the narrative early on but not in such a way that deviated too far from past mystical superheroes. The brief, though interrupted, outline of the Kabbalah in issue five and the Tantric sex outline in issue ten, especially the later, seem to set aside entirely the traditional comic narrative in favor of what amounts to a narrative grimoire of sorts, an occult primer in which Moore actively engages the reader. Issue twelve marks this transition, and it is also one of the finest uses of the comics medium.

Pick a Thread, Any Thread

The twelfth issue of *Promethea*, "The Magic Theatre: A Pop Art Happening," is impressive in its structure not just for its clear departure from the traditional comics format in terms of design but for its masterful weaving of several visual and verbal threads. The issue begins when Promethea consults the snakes on her caduceus staff, the scepter associated with the god Hermes, for magical guidance. The twin serpents refer to themselves as "Mike" and "Mack," representing the microcosm and the macrocosm respectfully. In a starry void within the Immateria, the snakes lead Promethea towards a

deck of cards, the Tarot, and beckon her to pick a card, any card, and what follows is a masterpiece in sequential art.

Moore's inspiration for the complex structure came from an issue from a sixties British underground magazine, *OZ*, titled *Magic Theatre*, in which conventional linear progression was set aside for a more freeform multiple thread narrative. The interweaving of multiple visual and verbal threads harkens back to the multimodal performance pieces which directly preceded the comic, albeit limited to the two-dimensional page, but the effect is still the same: a dense experience that requires the reader's full attention and involvement in order to reach closure. There are two visual/verbal threads that are of focus: Mike and Mack's poetical descriptions of the twenty-two cards of the Major Arcana of the Tarot and a joke as told by Crowley from his birth to his death.

Moore, viewing the medium at his disposal, noticed that the industry standard twenty-four page limit could accommodate the Major Arcana with a prologue and epilogue as bookends. In order to add more than a visual dimension to the Tarot's inclusion, Moore, with the consultation of Steve Moore (the human catalyst of Moore's artistic and spiritual endeavors), attributed the chronological sequence of the Major Arcana with the macrocosmic history of both the universe from Big Bang to Big Crunch and the history of the human race in terms of evolution and culture, culminating in the Apocalypse. This is all achieved with the rather clever poetical rhymes of the twin serpents. This incredibly dense analysis and use of the Tarot's iconic images in its original sequence lends itself well to comics theory as they are simply images in deliberate sequence from which the reader/viewer extrapolates meaning.

The Crowley joke, which was featured in the occultist's *Magick in Theory and Practice*, is told by an aging Crowley from birth to death. Appropriately situated at the bottom of the pages, this is a microcosmic narrative thread dealing with the growth and decay inherent in the progression of life and the universe. The joke is rather simple, but monumental in its implications. A man is traveling in a railway car and on his lap there is a box with holes punctured on top. Another traveler sits across from him; curious, he inquires upon the animal within. The man with the box explains that the animal is a mongoose. The inquiring traveler asks about his destination, and the man with some reluctance responds by saying that he is visiting his brother suffering from hallucinations of snakes, hence the mongoose. When the inquiring traveler points out that the snakes haunting the man are imaginary, the man with the box replies, "Indeed . . . but this . . . is an imaginary mongoose" (*Book Two*). This is not a deception; it's a liberation through the imaginary processes of the human mind. As Moore says, "I traffic in fiction. I do not traffic in lies" (*Mindscape*). The comic the reader holds in his or her hand is not an opiate but rather an act of sincerity on the part of its creators.

A Path-working in Sequential Art

Issues fourteen through twenty-three, comprising nearly a quarter of the entire series, depict Sophie's journey through the ten Sephiroth of the Kabbalistic Tree of Life, a map of the macrocosm and the microcosm, from mundane reality (Malkuth) all the way to the Godhead or the source of creation (Kether). Israel Regardie, the writer and occultist whose literature helped dispel the fog of obscurity around the occult in the early-to-mid 20th century, asserts that the aspiring magician should ascend the Tree of Life and study the nature of each sphere with the meticulous attention to detail and recording of

scientific experiment (233). An in-depth analysis of the Sephiroth is an in-depth analysis of the human experience. Sophie originally embarks on this path in order to find Barbara, a past vessel of the Promethea spirit recently deceased, but after finding her in the second sphere Yesod, the two continue onwards up the Tree of Life in order to reunite Barbara with her husband. Each issue during this run corresponds with a certain Kabbalistic sphere, and the art style adapts to best suit the mood or attributive qualities of that Sephirot. The second sphere, Yesod, represents the realm of the imagination and fantasy and is drawn with heavy influence from the paintings of Vincent Van Gogh. Likewise, the fifth sphere, Geburah, encapsulating strength and anger, is colored in harsh tones of red. Since the reader is vicariously traveling up the Tree along with Sophie and Barbara, Moore and Williams took great pains to represent these states of mind (and existence) so as to create a true psychedelic experience for the reader. Issue twelve is simply testing the waters; these issues go further in hopes of creating a truly transformative experience.

A summary of the entire Kabbalistic run, while it would yield great insight, would not accommodate the structure of this thesis, so specific instances will be analyzed. The third sphere of the Tree of Life is Hod, and it is the domain of the sciences, language, and magic. Moore uses this stop on the Kabbalistic path to once again experiment with the reader's involvement and presence within the narrative. In an innovative use of the two-page spread, Sophie and Barbara find themselves on a path resembling a Mobius Strip. After hearing previous/future conversations along the path, they realize they are caught in a loop. Here is how one would read this page: right hand holding right side of the open book, left hand holding left side, accompanied by motions that resemble the exaggerated pantomime of operating a steering wheel. Moore cleverly traps the reader in the process

of closure since there is no discernible end. The reader must consciously turn the page in order to continue the narrative and rescue the characters from the loop. Next, they encounter silvery material similar to that featured in *The Invisibles*, which are also postulated as being language given form, the meta-material of creation. Sophie and Barbara encounter the gods associated with the mercurial arts of this sephirot, the most notable of these being Hermes, who lectures them (and the reader) on the pervasive role language has in the universe and its significance in the construction of reality. When Barbara asks if the gods are bound by language, Hermes enthusiastically responds by affirming, saying that it is necessary for humans to use story to perceive their gods through various mediums such as “picture-stories.” After he points out how it is only natural for a language god like himself to “manifest through the original pictographic form of language,” he remarks, “some fictions might have a real god hiding beneath the surface of the page . . . some fictions might be alive.” Here, the god on the page turns and looks at the reader, breaking the fourth wall surprisingly untampered with up to this point (*Book Three*).

Moore’s Apocalyptic Vision

From the earliest issues of the series, Sophie’s destiny was made clear: shepherd in humanity’s next stage of evolution from mundane reality onto the thirty-second path of the Tree of Life towards Yesod, the Foundation i.e. the basis of spiritual thought. Here, matter and mind are inextricably linked like the twin snakes on the caduceus. In a mass consensual gnosis, humanity becomes self-aware of its own divinity, its own possibility. In the final issues, Moore and Williams make fantastic use of the medium as the narrative approaches the inevitable Apocalypse.

As the end of the world nears, time becomes fluid and fragmented, resulting in an exhilarating experience for the reader. Scene transitions are depicted with a chaotic elegance to give a full picture of the event's magnitude. Everyone is present in this event as New York City becomes every city and the division between thought and form dissolves, a worldwide extension of Blake's fourfold city of the imagination, Golgonooza. Not even the grave discriminates. In one panel, John Lennon is witnessing the spectacle like everyone else. The President sits worried in his oval office. The most important individual, however, is addressed directly by Promethea during a fireside chat: the reader. The parallel action during this sequence is set aside later in order for the reader to fully attend to Promethea's words, but during the structured chaos of panels the reader becomes aware of his or her own presence as Moore and Williams themselves look behind them to see, presumably, the reader; in order to further immerse the reader into the apocalyptic event, they implicate themselves into their own narrative.

The penultimate issue, "The Radiant, Heavenly City," consists of two halves: an uninterrupted fireside chat with the reader and a glimpse at the world post-apocalypse. The former is set in a warm room across the Goddess, all smiles and benevolence. Promethea comforts the reader and addresses the skepticism that may or may not have crossed his or her mind before her monologue, a beautiful summation of the entire series. Like Barbelith, she is the icon which remained close at hand to see everything to fruition. After this, she gives her parting message:

Rejoice. Return now to your separate moments, selves, and rooms, and know that separation for *illusion*. Know that you were one, were here, and in eternity are here forever. Here, where sudden firelight in your soul startled you from your worldly slumber. (*Book Five*)

When she leaves, the next page reveals the colorful, crisp new world. The stark contrast between the city as depicted in the first issue of the series and this one is staggering, the difference between the materialist and the spiritualist perspective on one's place; however, this is not utopia. While talking to one of the federal agents who tried to prevent the apocalypse, Sophie remarks that the ascendance to heaven did not leave behind the problems of the mundane world such as war, crime, or the need for shelter and sustenance. Not everyone understood the revelation. It's all a matter of choice. The reader has to choose to accept, decline, or acknowledge the revelatory experience before change can occur.

At the beginning of Moore's script for the final, thirty-second issue of *Promethea*, he writes: "Okay, this is a very strange artefact we're putting together, but if we all stay calm it should work like a dream" (*Book Five*). The previous attempts of the creators at breaking free from traditional comics storytelling culminate in this psychedelic masterpiece, the swan song for *Promethea*. What is spectacular about the thirty-two page issue is not the content, which is only a cumulative summation of magical thought, but the construction of the comic on the part of the reader. Moore designed the comic for the pages to be cut out and reassembled into a giant poster with the front and back featuring the Goddess's smile in the seemingly abstract colorization. This tactile interaction with the comic lets the reader construct a breathtaking work of art out of fragments as the comics reading process becomes physically manifest and kinetic. Kraemer breaks the mere conjecture around *Promethea*'s potential as an artifact of spiritual education by noting diverse occult groups who have actually assigned the comic alongside other

writings, citing Moore's work a particularly effective treatise on the subject of magic (288-289).

After the reader experiences the final page of *Promethea*, the dance between Moore's creation and the reader only slows for a change of partners as the reader inevitably seeks out the next waltz with another facet of imagination's marvelous continuum.

Conclusion

This thesis dealt extensively with potentialities, for one must make the choice to read a work in order to experience it, thereby subjecting him or herself to the possibility of a gnostic reading experience. Choice is paramount. Even if the reader is not privy to the nature of these works, they ultimately decide to hold the book in their hands and turn one page after another. At the outset of this thesis, I mentioned that gnosis can occur in an instant and/or as the result of patient cultivation. Art, as evidence in these case studies, is the primary means of mediating the gnostic experience. The comics medium stood out amongst the vast continuum of art after I entertained a connection between Blake's illuminated works and Morrison and Moore's comics. This research unlocked a new perspective on art, spirituality, and how the two intertwine with the writer and reader's experience of the creative artefact.

Blake's work is attributed to revelation. Alan Ginsburg's spiritual revelation and/or mental breakdown in his New York apartment consisted of a Blakean vision accompanied with a marathon reading of his works; the term visionary is not applied lightly. Ginsburg then pursued a life of art that refused to be shackled by status quo. This chain event is immense in its potential as it suggests a great work involving many artists—a tradition. Morrison and Moore are a contemporary snapshot of where this chain has led into the 21st century. This thesis was a brief immersion into a liberating tradition of art that exalts the creative faculties of the human mind. Gnosis was the central theme of analysis as I traced its presence in the lives of the writers, their works, their intent behind the works, and the readers' experience. Although it might have been unconventional to trace a theme through so many facets of the creative process, it

resulted in a comprehensive analysis of the interweaving relationship between art and life. While their beliefs are certainly idiosyncratic, there lies a secular message underneath their practice: one has the means to free his or her mind, and one of many ways to do so is through the various modes of art i.e. any extension of the creative process.

This perspective on art can be a reservoir for scholarly or creative endeavors. Retrospectives of past artists through a spiritual lens could yield great insight into their lives and their works. While such studies have been done, perhaps this could be done with renewed vigor? As scholars, we can imbue these works with significance and advocate their enduring presence, refusing to let them fade away into the increasingly prevalent tides of materialist culture. We can acknowledge, celebrate, and propagate the power of the word. As creators, we can approach the empty page, the blank canvas, or the silence as sacred interfaces with which we can imbue ourselves and the universe with meaning.

This thesis began with the rather lofty claim that art is humanity's means of understanding the universe and the self. And why wouldn't it? As the aforementioned figures have used the composite media of their illuminated work or comics work to explore the realms of the mind and the spaces without, there lies one glaring comparison.

Life.

Our lives are multimodal and composite in form, involving the most complex use of our sensory input imaginable to produce a constantly evolving narrative with a

staggering cast of characters unrestrained by genre, a mutable drama prone to the occasional plot twist.

The process of producing this work, from research to execution, has changed the way I look at the world around me. Immersing myself in these works was akin to a massive download of information, and the only way to process this was to alter the operating system. I have become painfully aware of the binary thought process both within myself and in those around me. I look around me and I see the incredible power of art denigrated to the manipulation of the masses for profit and control. Art has become sacred to me. When I look at the blank page, I do not see nothing; I see infinities. My sentence is up.

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