Frank Miller entered the industry with the intention to concentrate on crime comics but found superheroes to be the only game in town. Because of this, Miller's work on the superhero title *Daredevil,* while being tremendous in its own right, did not factor into this book as highly as might be assumed at first glance. In a work on crime comics, Miller's *Daredevil* would be the first post-Wertham chapter (his *Sin City* might be the last), but here is little more than a lead-in to the realism (and revisionary realism) of his *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns.* This state of nearly-but-not-quite-out-of-the-genre should in no way reflect on the quality of works that are really a compromise formation, like Miller's *Daredevil,* Bendis's *Powers,* and Alan Moore's *Swamp Thing.* These are works that, while powerful and important, are only part of the superhero genre for marketing reasons: for the purposes of this book, they can hardly be considered superhero narratives at all.[29]

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[29] These compromise formations account for the lasting power of a genre many would like to see abolished to make way for a more varied market. The superhero narrative has proved itself able to accommodate a wide range of stories under its banner, grouping together such disparate titles as Frank Miller's *Elektra: Assassin* and Marvel's *Infinity Gauntlet.*

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Melancholy and the Infinite Earths

Will Brooker, in an unpublished essay on *Flex Mentallo,* gives a precise account of *Crisis on Infinite Earths* for those unfamiliar with the work. He writes:

The Crisis on Infinite Earths was a twelve-part maxiseries run by DC Comics in 1985. Its principle aim was to clean up the mess of narrative parallel universes which DC's writers had established over the past forty-five years, in order to start afresh with a single, easy-to-follow continuity. It achieved this aim by combining all of the possible earths into one, and killing off all the characters who didn't fit. The stories which had occurred "pre-Crisis" were therefore made unofficial, outside continuity, and would never be referred to again.[30]

In practice the Crisis did make DC's narrative universe more accessible to new readers. However, it also served the purpose of wiping out almost five decades of superhero history, and re-writing its main characters according to the more "serious," "adult" ethos of the mid-1980s. . . . Post-Crisis, the embarrassing moments of the 1950s and 1960s could simply be wiped out of history. There was to be no Rainbow Batman, for instance, no Bat-Mite, no Ace the Bat-Hound, no Batman in Ancient Rome, no Robin shouting "Come on, big boy!" to a pink alien.[31]

The word *crisis* derives from the Greek *krisis,* "judgment," and as Brooker makes clear, *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (1985) is interesting in its (editorial)

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[30] Will Brooker, "Hero of the Beach: Flex Mentallo at the End of the Worlds," unpublished.
[31] Ibid.

judgment on DC's superhero comic book universe. *Crisis,* by Marv Wolfman and George Pérez, begins with the idea that the universe was meant to be one whole and unified structure, but was unnaturally splintered into a multiverse. This multiverse was an architecture of parallel worlds that house various interpretations and alternate histories of established characters: a Superman married to Lois Lane, a Batman whose parents were never killed, a world where the superheroes of World War II fight Adolf Hitler eternally, an evil mirror image of the Justice League of America (the Crime Syndicate—Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, the Flash, and Green Lantern—become the villainous Ultra-Man, Owl-Man, Superwoman, Johnny Quick, and Power Ring). *Crisis* reveals that this situation of alternate histories is not natural but the result of a disaster that occurred eons ago. The planet Oa lies at the center of the universe, as a perfectly evolved scientific utopia; it is here that one man dares to use a powerful machine to look into the only realm of knowledge forbidden by tradition, the origins of the universe. His hubris results in a chain reaction that sends shock waves back in time, creating a situation in which the universe not only becomes a shattered and unstable multiverse, but always has been. The metaphor of this biblically styled story is unavoidable: by looking into origins, existence is splintered into a variety of mutually exclusive interpretations that have no center. The current state of the DC universe—all of the continuity problems and confusions and paradoxes, Umberto Eco's oneiric climate—is the retroactive result of looking too closely for a guiding and originating principle.

Two creatures are spun out of this catastrophe, powered by the energy released: the benevolent Monitor (raised on the moon of Oa) and the evil Anti-Monitor (raised on the moon's antimatter counterpart). Representatives for the forces of Order and Chaos, their birthplaces on matter and antimatter counterparts of a satellite of Oa, they are born literally slightly off-center. The Anti-Monitor gains power over his eternal foe, the Monitor, by destroying whole universes (remember, this is a multiverse). In the main battle between the Anti-Monitor and the Monitor's recruited superheroes, the universe is reborn the way it was meant to be: as a single unified whole. The Anti-Monitor did not simply eliminate whole universes (such as the world of the Crime Syndicate) but made it so that they never existed in the first place. *Crisis on Infinite Earths* was not designed to simply change the DC universe but to retroac-

tively restructure it around a new organizing principle, specifically, the "adult ethos" Brooker mentions above, the very significant demographic shift that made the target audience of the comic book companies eighteen to twenty-four-year-old college-educated males. Comic books were now expected to tell stories for adults using the building blocks of children's literature. Characters made obsolete by *Crisis* were engulfed by white energy that looked a lot like the blank page taking over, and Superman's origin, for example, was retold by John Byrne putting Superman in the position of meeting his old enemies for the first time again. Krypton was redesigned, and the Legion of Super Pets (superpowered animals added as comic relief to Superman in the 1950s) were nowhere to be seen. They had not been killed; they simply never existed in the first place.

This was not the finest writing in the history of superhero comics. It was in many ways merely a marketing gimmick, forcing readers to buy all twelve issues to understand the changes being imposed on all their favorite characters and the universe they inhabited, and to make the DC universe simpler to comprehend for new readers and readers who preferred the more manageable continuity of Marvel. *Crisis on Infinite Earths,* however, started the new interpretation of superheroes. Retroactive changes, reimaginings, reinterpretations, revisiting origins, and revisions became major storytelling tools, tools that, rather than overturning the difficulties of continuity, fit in nicely with Eco's "oneiric quality." The irony of *Crisis* was that its methodology, in simplifying continuity, was used to make superhero comic books all the more complex, convoluted, and rich: any attempt at simplifying continuity into something streamlined, clear, and direct—from *Batman: Year One* and *Daredevil: The Man Without Fear* to Marvel Comic's *Ultimate X-Men* and *Ultimate Spider-Man*—only results in another layer of continuity. To a large degree, the changes imposed by *Crisis* did not stick, and the DC universe was left even more chaotic than before.

The last Superman story before the *Crisis* revamp and John Byrne's *Man of Steel* was Alan Moore's *Superman: Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?* One of the most beloved Superman stories of all time, it begins with a poem:

This is an IMAGINARY STORY
(which may never happen, but then again may)

about a perfect man who came from the sky and did only good.
It tells of his twilight, when the great battles were over and great
    miracles long since performed;
of how his enemies conspired against him and of that final war
    in the snowblind wastes beneath the Northern Lights;
[....]
This is an IMAGINARY STORY . . .
Aren't they all?[32]

Imaginary stories were those "what ifs" that were not supposed to affect established continuity but ended up creating an alternate continuity of their own and were about to be wiped out by *Crisis.* Here, Moore recognizes the absurdity of delineating between "real" fictional stories and "imaginary" ones, and his statement is a defense against the changes he knows are coming to *Superman. Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?* delights in every aspect of Superman's chaotic continuity, however absurd, that is about to be erased, and even manages to feature a moment with Krypto the Superdog, doomed not to make it out of *Crisis,* that is one of the few genuinely poignant *Superman* moments. In the story, all of Superman's enemies attack at once, and he must retreat into his Fortress of Solitude and protect his loved ones against a threat that—for the first time in his life—he believes he cannot stop. It turns out to be a malevolent Mxyzptlk behind it all: Superman kills him and, because he has broken his vow never to take a life, retires. His powers removed forever, he lives happily ever after with Lois Lane and lets the world believe Superman is dead. Moore's "last Superman story," while nostalgic about the rich (if sometimes ridiculous) continuity about to be wiped out, achieves a premature melancholy.

    In the years after *Crisis,* DC would set up an "Elseworlds" banner that would feature alternative takes on established heroes—Batman as a vampire, Batman in the nineteenth century, Superman initially crashing to Earth in the Soviet Union. Unlike the imaginary stories of previous decades no attempt was made to give these "worlds" a metaphysical framework. There are no "parallel timelines" or an alternate Earth orbiting directly opposite ours, or Earth's antimatter counterpart. By

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[32] Alan Moore, Kurt Swan, et al., *Superman: Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?* (New York: DC Comics, 1997).

2000, the industry would tolerate exactly the situation lamented as lost in *Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?*: Grant Morrison and Frank Quitely's stand-alone graphic novel *JLA: Earth-2. Earth-2* is the story of the Crime Syndicate of Amerika mysteriously alive and kicking and not under the "Elseworlds" banner, even though they were visibly killed off in *Crisis on Infinite Earths.* It is this continuity in ambiguity that is a unifying feature of the pre-Wildstorm works given attention in this book.

    The multiverse is reduced to a universe at the end of *Crisis.* But the earlier ambiguity will make itself felt in the revisionary superhero narrative, which exists (in part) to come to terms with it. This ambiguity will expand until the multiverse is reinstalled as a concept in several forms: Mark Waid's *The Kingdom* (1999) introduces to the DC universe the concept of hypertime:

> Hypertime. The vast, interconnected web of parallel timelines which comprise all reality. . . . an unpredictable multi-verse, an infinite realm of parallel worlds where reality as you know it has taken different twists and turns. . . . Events of importance often cause divergent "tributaries" to branch off the main timestream. . . . On occasion those tributaries return—sometimes feeding back into the central timeline, other times overlapping it briefly before charting an entirely new course.[33]

Alan Moore created a similar concept for Image Comics in his *1963* (1993), which, in debt to the story by Jorge Luis Borges of the same name, he calls the Aleph: "a point from which all other points are visible . . . windows to other universes."[34] In his work on Awesome Comics'

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[33] Mark Waid et al., *The Kingdom* (New York: DC Comics, 1998), 226–227. Note the phrase *twists and turns,* derived from the first line of Robert Fagles's translation of Homer's *Odyssey.* What is interesting is that the word Fagles is trying to communicate (a word that has given many of Homer's translators difficulty) is the Greek *polytropon,* or "many ways." *Tropos* (the dictionary form of *tropon*) is the ancient Greek source of the English word *trope,* or metaphor. Waid's conception recognizes, on some level, what Warren Ellis' Snowflake instinctively knows: the conception of the multiverse is a vision of "polytropes," or various metaphors, misreadings, and misprisions, of superhero continuity. Homer, *The Odyssey,* trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin, 1996).
[34] Alan Moore et al., *1963* (Fullerton, CA: Image Comics, 1993), #6.

Supreme, he introduced a similar space for *Supreme* continuity, called "the Supremacy."[35] Waid's description of hypertime is accompanied by visuals of DC universe continuity wiped out by *Crisis on Infinite Earths;* Moore's Aleph contains visuals of independently owned comic books— including Frank Miller's *Sin City,* Dave Sim's *Cerebus,* and Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*—suggesting a multiverse that includes links to more than just one company's comic book universe. Grant Morrison's *Marvel Boy* (2000) introduces Macrospace into the Marvel universe: "Splintered across the endless, infinite worlds of the superspectrum: the immense rainbow of realities, where everything you ever imagined is just as real as everything else and all at once."[36] Morrison's description is accompanied by visuals of several universes, including one that alludes to Wildstorm's *Authority* and *Planetary.*

In an objective superhero history of the DC universe, Waid's concept of "hypertime" brings the DC universe to full multiplicity of storytelling, encompassing every DC universe yarn in a metaphysical framework of intersecting timelines. In this study of the revisionary superhero narrative, the Snowflake from Warren Ellis's *Planetary* is the cathexis of these narrative trends and a link to them all. Waid's hypertime, Moore's Aleph, and Morrison's Macrospace are statements about continuity and possibility in the superhero story, but Warren Ellis's *Planetary* (1998) presents us with a version that brings with it an imaginative and persuasive force that assures, despite chronology, its priority in the tradition of the superhero narrative.

Crisis would fail miserably as an attempt at simplification, giving the world a DC universe that made even less sense than before. What would change in the next fifteen years (in the works that are discussed in chapters 1 through 5) is the perspective that saw unwieldy chaos as a bad thing. Like many aspects of superhero comic books, what appears to a newcomer or outside observer as a drawback or flaw turns out to be, upon closer inspection, one of the genre's unique strengths. The path that gets the superhero story from the reduction of chaotic continuity in a single fictional universe through the burden of continuity and tradition to *Planetary*'s Snowflake is the focus of this book.

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35 Alan Moore et al., *Supreme* (Fullerton, CA: Maximum Press, 1996), vol. 3, #41.

36 Grant Morrison, J. G. Jones, et al., *Marvel Boy* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2000), #5.

The Bat and the Watchmen

INTRODUCING THE REVISIONARY SUPERHERO NARRATIVE

A succession of men had sat in that chair. I became aware of that thought suddenly, vividly, as though each had left a little of himself between the four walls of these ornate bulkheads; as if a sort of composite soul, the soul of command, had whispered suddenly to mine of long days at sea, and of anxious moments.

—Joseph Conrad, *The Shadow Line*

Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) and Alan Moore's *Watchmen* (1986) are the first instances of a kind of literature I am going to identify as the revisionary superhero narrative: a superhero text that, in Harold Bloom's words, is a "strong misreading" of its poetic tradition, a comic book whose "meaning" is found in its relationship with another comic book. Although strong work existed in comics before this point—in the works of Will Eisner and Jack Kirby, for example—it is with these titles that, to quote critic Perry Meisel, referring to the blues tradition after swing, "a tradition now [exists] sufficiently dense with precedent to cause the kinds of self-consciousness and anxiety with which we [as students of literature] are familiar."[37] I will trace the development of this new kind of comic book—this new kind of literature—from its inauguration in 1986 to its present-day form, marking its changes, shifts, and misprisions, noting its differences and similarities to other forms of literature, but primarily

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37 Perry Meisel, *The Cowboy and the Dandy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 55–56.

HOW TO READ
SUPERHERO
COMICS AND WHY

Geoff Klock

continuum