

# Batman and the Shadows of Modernity

A Critical Genealogy on Contemporary  
Hero in the Age of Nihilism

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## Chapter 4

### The Savior and Nihilism

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## 4 The Savior and Nihilism

Human mechanics. Whoever suffers tries to communicate his suffering (either by ill-treating someone or calling forth his pity) in order to reduce it, and he does really reduce it in this way. In the case of a man in the uttermost depths, whom no one pities, who is without power to ill-treat anyone (if he has no child or being who loves him), the suffering remains within him and poisons him.

This is imperative, like gravity. How can one gain deliverance? How can one gain deliverance from a force which is like gravity?

(Weil 19897, § Void and Compensation, 49)

In Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, an anti-Batman spokesman debates with a not-too-distant-future Lana Lang, a former Superman lover who now represents an idealized vision of superheroes:

LANA: One almost expects to see the Bat-signal of one of Gotham's Twin Towers. Yes, he gave us quite a night...

MORRIE: Sure kept the hospital busy.

LANA: Yes, Morrie. But I think it's a mistake to think of this in purely political terms. Rather I regard it as a symbolic resurgence of the common man's will to resist. A rebirth of the American fighting spirit.

MORRIE: Ease up, Lana. The only thing he signifies is an aberrant psychotic force, morally bankrupt, politically hazardous, reactionary paranoid, a danger to every citizen of Gotham...

(1986, I, 33)

As Lana herself acknowledges, "it is a mistake to think of it in merely political terms". The political, certainly, is the first stage of the discussion, and it implies a profound reflection on the scope of sovereignty and its limits. However, it is not only the most fundamental layer but also a capillary manifestation of a much broader phenomenon embedded at the roots of modernity and its call to violence as destiny. In some post-humous writings from the year 1887/88, the German philosopher F. Nietzsche noted:

What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: *the advent of nihilism*. This history can be related even now; for necessity itself is at work here. This future speaks even now in a hundred signs [...]. For some time now, our whole European culture has been moving as toward a catastrophe, with a tortured tension that is growing from decade to decade: restlessly, violently, headlong, like a river that wants to reach the end, that no longer reflects, that is afraid to reflect.

(1968, 12)

Etymologically derived from the Latin *nihil* (nothing), the concept of nihilism describes the encounter with emptiness. It has many facets, but it refers ultimately to the suffering resulting from the widening gap between what the world has become and what we would like it to be. It is a crisis of spatiality. Most approaches to nihilism begin with an ontological investigation of what there *is* and its *disappearance*, followed by an ethical reflection on the decline of traditional values and concepts. Modernity had summarized this as the *absence of God*: firstly, as the exemption from causal responsibility brought by the modern laws of mechanics because once set in motion the universe no longer needs any corrective instance (Jacobi 1812, 425); then, as the impact caused by the fact that God the son has died without rising again and the world has been left to human initiative (Hegel 1977)—a twilight of the gods. But their absence leads inexorably to an axiological vacuum and a lack of practical references. The famous parable of the “death of God” in Nietzsche’s 1882 *The Gay Science* gives a full account of this new scenario:

Isn’t empty space breathing us? Hasn’t it got colder? Isn’t night and more night coming again and again? Don’t lanterns have to be lit in the morning? Do we still hear nothing on the noise of the grave-diggers who are burying God? Do we still smell nothing of the divine decomposition?—Gods, too, decompose!

(2001, 120)

This chapter brings the modern hero into relation with this heralded storm. It begins with a comparative journey through the venues of violence spawned by pain and panic and it continues with a comparative study of nihilistic heroes in modernity. Last but not least, one misreading will corroborate the connection between Batman’s obsession and nihilistic “possession” as the failure of an entire system of thought.

## About Nihilism

### *I. S. Turgenev: Fathers and Sons and the Generational Break*

Explicit concerns about nothingness have long existed in Western culture, starting with thinkers such as Gorgias, Fredegis of Tours, Meister Eckhardt, Charles de Bovelles, Leonardo da Vinci, or Leibniz with his question “why is there something instead of nothing?” (Leibniz 1991, 135). Strictly speaking, however, the first programmatic attempts at the problem of modern nihilism come from literature, that is, in a non-essayistic format. Until its most elaborate Nietzschean formulation, it was a few authors from the golden age of Russian literature that set the terms for the discussion. One can perceive in these authors a strong uneasiness before a looming time of destruction, with Ivan S. Turgenev being the first to vindicate the conceptualization of the generational schism in his 1862 novel, *Fathers and Sons*. Turgenev (1818–1883) portrays a moment in Russian history when the intelligentsia was struggling to adapt to the European model. This process of transformation meant the rupture of the original “idyll” of which the author spoke in his 1859 novel, *Home of the Gentry*, a disruption that he stages in *Fathers and Sons* as a clash between two worlds: an old world based on orthodoxy represented by the generation of Nikolai Petrovich Kirsanov, and a new world brought by a new generation, represented by Nikolai’s son, Arkady, and his friend, the medical student and naturalist Evgeny Bazarov. Both Arkady and Evgeny represent what Dobroliubov had called the “new people”, treasuring a new world in their hearts and not respecting anything when it came to conquering it. When speaking of Bazarov, the old generation put it as follows:

“He’s a nihilist,” repeated Arkady.

“Nihilist,” said Nikolai Petrovich. “That’s from the Latin *nihil*, nothing, as far as I can tell; therefore, the word signifies a person who... acknowledged nothing?”

“Say, rather, who respects nothing,” Pavel Petrovich put in, and once again set about spreading his butter.

“Who approaches everything from a critical point of view,” observed Arkady.

“Isn’t it all the same thing?” asked Pavel Petrovich.

“No, it isn’t all the same thing. A nihilist is a person who doesn’t bow down before authorities, doesn’t accept even one principle on faith, no matter how much respect surrounds that principle.”

“And is that a good thing?” Pavel Petrovich interrupted.

“That depends, Uncle. For some people, it’s good; for others, it’s not.”

“So that’s how it is. Well, I can see it’s not our cup of tea. We’re people of another age, we assume that without principles [Pavel Petrovich articulated this word softly, in the French manner; Arkady, on the

contrary, pronounced it *principles*, accenting the first syllable] without principles accepted, as you say, on faith, it's impossible to take a step, to draw a breath. *Vous avez change tout cela*, God grant you health and the rank of general; we'll merely stand by and admire you, you gentlemen... how is it?"

"Nihilist," Arkady replied clearly.

"Yes. Before there were Hegelists, and now we have nihilists. We'll see how you'll fare in a void, a vacuum."

(Turgenev 1994, 17–18)

It is interesting how Turgenev emphasizes the difference between Petrovich's and Arcadi's language as if confirming that generational distancing is already unstoppable. These new heroes referred to here by the author are indeed "nihilists", but quite differently from how it was later understood.<sup>1</sup> They are so, not because they have ceased to believe in the future—as proved by the connection between the nihilists of today and the Hegelians of the past—but because they are convinced that the passage into that promised future will only come about through the destruction of the present. Tradition must give way to belief. Nihilistic heroes are the bearers of an ideology of hope, in whose service Western rationalist instrumentalism is a proven value:

"As far as I am concerned", he began again, not without some effort "sinner that I am, I don't regard Germans with much favour. I'm not even talking about Russian Germans: it's well known what sort of creatures they are. Even German Germans aren't to my liking. Previously, there were some acceptable ones; they had their... well, there was a Schiller, also Goethe... My brother here's especially fond of them... But now all they have is chemists and materialists..."

"A decent chemist is twenty times more useful than any poet", Bazarov interrupted.

(20)

Progressives versus traditionalists. Revolutionaries versus conservatives. Idealism and social Romanticism versus spiritualism. And as a purifying fire against those old ideals, crude materialism. It is the famous dispute between "Slavophiles" as defenders of Russia's own genius and historical destiny, and "Westernists" as defenders of the idea that Russia should be integrated into European doctrine, a controversy that has kept the Russian "intelligentsia" busy to this day.<sup>2</sup> These sociological types have been continuously repeated since Turgenev, for example in the works of Nobel literature laureated Nadine Gordimer or J. M. Coetzee when they relate the generational conflict in apartheid South Africa. While it is true that Turgenev portrays this new generation as still incapable of action,<sup>3</sup> his work, nevertheless, confirms for the first time those two great paradigms that will

inexorably collide from now on: one outgoing that respects the existing, and one incoming that rejects it. For the latter, the world is just raw material for exploitation, calculation, and control, and no longer an object of mystery and contemplation:

“What’s important is that two times two makes four; all the rest’s nonsense”.

“And is nature nonsense?” asked Arkady, looking thoughtfully across the multicolored fields, gently and beautifully illuminated by the setting sun.

“Nature’s nonsense too in the sense you understand it. Nature’s not a temple, but a workshop where man’s the laborer”.

(33)

Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons* functions as a warning of darkness in the offing. Barely a few years later, in 1869, this servitude to instrumental reason here denounced by the older generations will take definitive form in the famous manifesto *Catechism of the Revolutionist* of the Russian terrorist Sergey Nechayev. In the third point of the section “Principles by which the Revolutionary Must Be Guided”, we read:

The revolutionary despises all doctrinairism and has rejected the mundane sciences, leaving them to future generations. He knows of only one science: the science of destruction. To this end, and this end alone, he will study mechanics, physics, chemistry, and perhaps medicine. To this end he will study day and night the living science: people, their characters and circumstances and all the features of the present social order at all possible levels. His sole and constant goal [цель] is the immediate and surest [найвернейшее] destruction of this vile order.

(Nechayev 1989, 4–5. Trans. mod.)

### *F. M. Dostoevsky: Nihilism as Split*

Similarly to Turgenev, this conflict was also examined by Fyodor M. Dostoevsky, although the latter disassociated the concept from a specific generational attitude and brought it closer to a general pathological diagnosis. What Turgenev had coined as nihilism to describe a specific phenomenon is now presented as an amendment to the totality.

To understand Dostoevsky’s position, it is relevant to reconstruct part of his own experiences. Originally, the young Muscovite showed his sympathies toward the ideals of the first Russian revolutionaries of the 19th century and he was in contact with Vissarion Belinsky and a group of utopian revolutionaries known as Petrashevsky’s circle. For these activists, individualist attacks were the engine of historical change, and praxis had to be enacted not from within—that is, building collective consciousness—but from outside, as an external shocking vanguard. Dostoevsky’s dangerous

friendships eventually led to arrest and condemnation to death by the authorities, a sentence that was commuted at the last moment to several years of exile in Siberia (see Sekirin 1997, 107–141).

That experience transformed his worldview. After being released years later, he finally visited Western Europe in 1862 and had the opportunity to see the Crystal Palace in London, built by Joseph Paxton for the 1851 Great Exhibition. From that moment on, Dostoevsky characterized Western civilization as a “glass palace”, in an ironic and clear allusion to Chernyshevsky’s 1863 novel, *What Is to Be Done?*, which celebrated that, after the final resolution of social conflicts by technical means, a communal life without suffering, predictable and transparent in a rich palace of glass and steel would be possible<sup>4</sup>—pure utilitarian rationalism. A fragile promise of happiness to come at the end of history reduced existence to a mere chemical formula and exposed it as an object of progress under the scientific gaze of a “new man”. The philosopher Peter Sloterdijk described this movement as “the complete absorption of the outer world into an inner space that was calculated through and through” (Sloterdijk 2008, 15). An absolute visibility of things reduces the particularity of the present to a mere logical moment in the course toward its essence as destiny.<sup>5</sup>

Following his great revolutionary disappointment, Dostoevsky would address the problem of nihilism with unusual depth throughout his mature years. In the generational drama around a patricide in his last novel, *The Brothers Karamazov* of 1880, the modern crisis is explained by a referential displacement, according to the famous principle that “if God does not exist, then everything is permitted”. But before reaching the pinnacle of this formulation, Dostoevsky had dealt with the problem in different settings. In 1872, he published *The Devils* (*Бесы*, also translated as *The Possessed*, or *Demons*). Among the first motives that prompted the composition of this work was a terrorist attempt on the Tsar in 1866. But the ultimate inspiration for the narrative direction was a real crime that took place in late 1869 when a group organized by the very Sergey Nechayev came to the Petrovskaya Agricultural Academy in Moscow to commit the political murder of the student Ivan Shatov, a co-religionist from the same cell. Chernyshevsky’s practical commandment casts a long shadow:

On the table lay an open book. It was the novel, “What’s to be done?” Alas, I must confess one strange weakness in my friend; the fantasy that he ought to come forth from his solitude and fight a last battle was getting more and more hold upon his deluded imagination. I guessed that he had got the novel and was *studying* it solely in order that when the inevitable conflict with the “shriekers” came about he might know their methods and arguments beforehand, from their very “catechism”, and in that way be prepared to confute them all triumphantly, *before her eyes*. Oh, how that book tortured him! He sometimes flung it aside in despair, and leaping up, paced about the room almost in a frenzy.

(Dostoevsky 2005, 295)

One can certainly recognize here Dostoevsky's obscure experience as a member of the Petrashevsky Circle, as well as his subsequent condemnation in the Siberian hell. In *The Devils*, he describes the "nihilistic" motivations of the new revolutionary generations in Russia around two key figures: Pyotr Verkhovensky (inspired by Nechaev) and Nikolai Stavroguin, probably "the fullest embodiment in Dostoevsky's works of nihilism, of the spirit of negation" (Lantz 2004, 88). In 1870, the same year of the inception of the manuscript in Dresden, Dostoevsky described the theme of the novel from the biblical anecdote that gives the novel its title, namely, "a man who loses his people and his national roots also loses the faith of his forefathers and his God. [...] It is called *The Devils*, and it describes how the devils entered the herd of swine" (Dostoevsky quoted in Leatherbarrow 2000, 302). At one point in the story, fire engulfs the riverside neighborhood, only to reveal that at least one of the outbreaks was set by the "vampire Stavgorin" to cover up a murder. As he rushes to the scene of the fire, Governor Lembke exclaims, "It's all incendiarism! It's nihilism! If anything is burning, it's nihilism!" And then he adds in desperation that "[t]he fire is in the minds of men and not in the roofs of houses" (Dostoevsky 2005, 536–537).

In his four great novel dramas—*Crime and Punishment* of 1866, *The Idiot* of 1868–69, *The Devils* of 1872, and *The Brothers Karamazov* of 1879–80—we can recognize the same anxieties about the course of modernity. As the notes to *The Idiot* suggest, the themes of transgression, death, and salvation are constantly present in the Dostoevskian corpus. There is no further development of these issues from work to work, which means that the main theme is already displayed from the beginning of his great production. This being the case, *Crime and Punishment* synthetically articulates all of Dostoevsky's concerns about nihilism, heroes, crime, and salvation, and it is not in vain that Marcel Proust argued that the whole corpus could well be called "crime and punishment" (Proust 1984, 381). What is at the core of these compositions? Originally serialized over 12 monthly issues in *The Russian Herald* (*Русский вестник*), *Crime and Punishment* chronicles the crisis that precedes and follows young student Raskolnikov who, driven by a keen sense for social justice, plots to murder the pawnbroker and moneylender Alyona Ivanovna. Woven in the darkness of his room, his revolutionary program legitimizes any "superior man" to take justice into his own hands and transform the world to his image and will. Like the heroes of the 1840s generation, Raskolnikov had initially only fantasized about such an idea of Napoleonic flavor and published it in a paper. But at a certain point, and in the spirit of the 1860s, he finally commits to action. Prior to the despair brought on by the horror unleashed by his act, the young man summarizes such a program:

I merely believe in my main idea. It consists precisely in the view that by the laws of nature, people are divided *in general* into two categories: the lower category (ordinary), that is, so to speak, material serving solely for the purpose of reproducing the species, and into people proper, that

is, those who possess the gift or talent of uttering some *new world* in their milieu. [...] [T]he first category, that is, the material, speaking in general, consists of conservative people by nature, well-behaved, who live in obedience and like being obedient. In my opinion, they're even obligated to be obedient because that's their destiny, and there's nothing humiliating about it for them. The second category consists of people who break the law, destroyers or, judging by their abilities, those predisposed to be so. Their crimes, it goes without saying, are relative and diverse; for the most part, in extremely diverse forms they require the destruction of the present order in the name of something better.

(Dostoevsky 2018, 286)

Whereas the first category of people are “men of the present” the second category sees themselves as called upon to “move the world forward and lead it to its goal” (287). With the authority of his faith, Raskolnikov wields the axe (as Chernishevsky had written to his editor: “only the axe can save us, and nothing but the axe!”) and directs it against Aliona, the old usurer who torments the tenants of the neighborhood:

But even if it's necessary to step over a corpse, to wade through blood in order to attain his goal, then in my opinion he may, according to his conscience, give himself permission to wade through blood, depending, however, on the nature of his idea and its dimensions.

(286)

Previously, we have seen for the exceptionalist currents, the sovereign decides on the state of exception based on an alleged moral superiority. This logic is also reproduced here by means of the dichotomy of ordinary person/extraordinary person, and the consequent contrast between *official right* and *inner right*:

The only difference is that I don't insist in any way that extraordinary people absolutely must and are always obligated to commit all sorts of outrages, as you say. It even seems to me that such an article wouldn't be accepted for publication. I merely imply that the “extraordinary man” has the right... that is, not the official right, but he himself has the right to permit his conscience to overstep... various obstacles, and only in the case that the execution of his idea (sometimes, perhaps, one that would benefit all mankind) requires it.

(285)

Raskolnikov is talking here about the *right to commit a crime*. In the original title of the novel (*Преступление и наказание*), the first noun (crime, transgression) connotes the idea of overcoming an impediment. For Raskolnikov, the creation of new historical spaces derives from a leap over positive law, to the extent that

those who are even marginally capable of uttering some new Word, must, by their nature, necessarily be criminals [...] Otherwise it would be difficult for them to break out the rut, and, of course, they can't agree to remain in the rut again, by their very nature.

(286)

As a label and as a theme, “crime and punishment” refers ambivalently both to the alleged structural crime on the part of Alyona Ivanovna followed by her punishment at the hand of the protagonist, and to the crime of punishing her by crossing the limits once the hero feels legitimized to save the future. Various symbolisms attempt to signify the unease stemming from the spatial crisis that ultimately leads to the unforgivable sin of action, especially the very name of Raskolnikov (from Russian РАСКОЛ: schism, split). As noted by Nikolai Berdyaev: “[Raskolnikov] let himself get obsessed by some fixed idea, an under its tyranny freedom soon begins to disappear” (1962, 96); “[he] was a divided, riven being, from whom freedom was already alienated by his inner unhealthiness” (98). Just like Batman—also a man of action inspired by grandiloquent romantic ideas—Raskolnikov “is a child of darkness” (44).

#### *F. Nietzsche: Nihilism as the Death of References*

For Russian novelists, nihilism is the crisis that arises when the world has lost its old code of references. This thesis was also taken up by Nietzsche, who observes the dark night that follows the “death of God”. Nietzsche implies, however, a broadening of the diagnosis when he enters to notice the impossible return to any original referential place. While Russian novelists call for the recognition of the killer of God so that we can return to Him, for Nietzsche God is dead for good; it does not matter who or what has killed him but rather how to live life from that moment onwards. He formidably illustrates this question in the well-known madman's parable from *The Gay Science*:

Haven't you heard of that madman who in the bright morning lit a lantern and ran around the marketplace crying incessantly, “I'm looking for God! I'm looking for God!” Since many of those who did not believe in God were standing around together just then, he caused great laughter. Has he been lost, then? asked one. Did he lose his way like a child? asked another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? [...] The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. “Where is God?” he cried; “I'll tell you! *We have killed him*—you and I! We are all his murderers. But how did we do this? [...] Where is it moving to now? Where are we moving to? Away from all suns? Are we not continually falling? [...] Is there still an up and a down? Aren't we straying as though through an infinite nothing? Isn't empty space breathing at

us? Hasn't it got colder? [...] God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him!"

(2001, 120)

The image of a madman or a fool looking for God with a lantern in broad daylight recalls the ancient philosopher Diogenes the Cynic when he wandered looking for an honest man also in full daylight, and it amplifies the heartbreaking revelation. There is nothing negative about the revelation of the death of God as it opens a whole new space of possibilities. Nietzsche accepts thus the challenge previously posed by young Hegel in *Faith and Knowledge* when he says that “the highest totality can and must achieve its *resurrection* solely from this harsh consciousness of loss, encompassing everything, and ascending in all its earnestness and out of its deepest ground to the most serene freedom of its shape” (1977, 191. Emphasis mine). Nietzsche does, however, find the current reluctance to face the consequences a problem:

Is the magnitude of this deed [*Tat*] not too great for us? Do we not ourselves have to become gods merely to appear worthy of it? There was never a greater deed—and whoever is born after us will on account of this deed belong to a higher history than all history up to now!” Here the madman fell silent and looked again at his listeners; they too were silent and looked at him disconcertedly. Finally he threw his lantern on the ground so that it broke into pieces and went out. “I come too early”, he then said; “my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men. Lightning and thunder need time; the light of the stars needs time; deeds [*Taten*] need time, even after they are done, in order to be seen and heard. This deed is still more remote to them than the remotest stars—and yet they have done it themselves!

(2001, 120)

On the question of nihilism, therefore, Nietzsche simultaneously includes and expands on the position of the Russians. On the one hand, the philosopher applauds the Slavophile view that identifies those who lash out against great values as “nihilist”:

Nihilism: the goal is lacking; an answer to the “What for [*Wozu*]?” is lacking. What does nihilism mean?—*That the highest values are devalued.*  
(2003, 146. Translation modified)

But on the other hand, the analysis widens and nihilism gains a specific positive connotation when it comes to reject those values that stifled us in life and that even after death continue to mark their sinister agenda. We will examine this meaning of nihilism as “transvaluation” in more detail in the

following chapter. At this point, we will give nihilism a comprehensive negative meaning: nihilism applies to the destruction of the present under the teleological promise of an original destination. Nihilism is, for Nietzsche, not the isolated action of an agent but that whole situation that leads actions toward total annihilation without ever demonstrating a real will to create.

\*

Nihilism is the moment of darkness that follows the absence of meaning. Given the lack of a credible alternative, a deep-rooted *horror vacui* fills the vacancy and becomes a disciplinary determination of reality by unilateral means (totalization process or *pars pro toto*) that polarizes reality (friend/enemy) and annuls otherness—if there is no room for assimilation, then it is the turn of final extermination (*Endlösung*). The savior is a “man of action” who embraces death as “propaganda for the fact” that immanent life is not enough. For him, to be is *not* to be—the being must be corrected because only what does not exist *is* of value. As Albert Camus aptly described, these rebellious men

forget the present for the future, the fate of humanity for the delusion of power, the misery of the slums for the mirage of the eternal city, ordinary justice for the empty promised land. They despair of personal freedom and dream of a strange freedom of the species; reject solitary death and give the name of immortality to a vast collective agony.

They no longer believe in the things that exist in the world and in living man; [...] [T]hey wanted to efface joy from the world and to postpone it until a much later date. Impatience with limits, and [...] despair at being a man, have finally driven them to inhuman excesses. Denying the real grandeur of life, they have had to stake all on their own excellence. For want of something better to do, they deified themselves and their misfortunes began.

(1956, 305)

The nihilistic hero is totalitarian in the service of some empty ethics of domination. They suspend the present in the name of the future. They reduce real existence to nothingness. From Robespierre to the gulag and Auschwitz, from Nechayev to the Rote Armee Fraktion, from Jihadist terrorism to Ted Kaczynski the “Unabomber”, voluntarist terror becomes an instrument in the service of history, and thus its usurper.

History is made by active, determined minorities, not by the majority, which seldom has a clear and consistent idea of what it really wants. Until the time comes for the final push toward revolution, the task of revolutionaries will be less to win the shallow support of the majority than to build a small core of deeply committed people. As for the

majority, it will be enough to make them aware of the existence of the new ideology and remind them of it frequently; though of course it will be desirable to get majority support to the extent that this can be done without weakening the core of seriously committed people.

(Kaczynski 1995, §189)

## Modern hero as a terrorist

### *The Knight-errant vs. the Displacement of the Modern Episteme*

The processes that led at the dawn of modernity to the “death of God” and the re-opening of His space are indeed diverse and complex. The French genealogist Michel Foucault sought to reveal some of the presuppositions of this obscure interplay of confluences and deviations in his own archaeology of the modern worldview or episteme. In *The Order of Things* (*Les mots et les choses*, 1966), Foucault attempts to explain the mutations of early modernity in terms of the dissociation between the signifier and the signified. If, during the classical age, the forms of Western knowledge were representational, from a certain moment on the relation of adequacy and correspondence between words and things loses any validity (Foucault 2002, 51–85). For that classical worldview or “episteme”, words were signs of things, and whoever wished to know things had only to go from those specular signs to their origin. To know was to decipher. The universe was *legenda*, i.e., things to be read (44).<sup>6</sup> But in modernity words don’t stand for things. Words refer instead to other words. Correspondence no longer is the mechanism of truth. Now there is no place of origin. There is no center anymore. In a well-known descriptive chronology of *Twilight of the Idols* of 1889, Nietzsche proclaims that the “real world” has become fiction:

1. The true world, attainable for the wise, the devout, the virtuous—they live in it, *they are it*.  
(Oldest form of the idea, relatively clever, simple, convincing. Paraphrase of the assertion, “I, Plato, *am* the truth.”)
2. The true world, unattainable for now, but promised to the wise, the devout, the virtuous (“to the sinner who does penance”).  
(Progress of the idea: it becomes more refined, more devious, more mystifying—it *becomes woman*, it becomes Christian...)
3. The true world, unattainable, unprovable, unpromisable, but a consolation, an obligation, an imperative, merely by virtue of being thought.  
(The old sun basically, but glimpsed through fog and skepticism; the idea become sublime, pallid, Nordic, Königsbergian.)
4. The true world—unattainable? In any case, unattained. And if it is unattained, it is also unknown. And hence it is not consoling, redeeming, or obligating either; to what could something unknown obligate us? ...

- (Gray dawn. First yawnings of reason. Rooster's crow of positivism.)
5. The "true world" —an idea with no use anymore, no longer even obligating—an idea becomes useless, superfluous, *hence* a refuted idea: let's do away with it!  
(Bright day; breakfast; return of bon sens [good sense] and cheerfulness; Plato blushes; pandemonium of all free spirits.)
6. We have done away with the true world: what world is left over? The apparent one, maybe?... But no! *Along with the true world, we have also done away with the apparent!*  
(Midday; moment of the shortest shadow; end of the longest error; high point of humanity; INCIPIT ZARATHUSTRA).

(1997, 23)

In this new world order, the crisis comes about because of this mismatch between ideas and their references while we still need their correspondence. We are moving between moments three and four of the Nietzschean sequence, above. The paradigmatic figure here, according to Foucault, is Don Quixote, a nostalgic for another time (moment 2) who struggles (moment 3) against this modern decentering (moment 4), resulting in disappointment and suffering. Both parts of Cervantes' novel *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha*, published in 1605 and 1615 respectively, can be regarded as a truly modern work, and the first and best exponent of that turning point where the old identities between signs and references end and new relationships are established:

Don Quixote is not a man given to extravagance, but rather a diligent pilgrim breaking his journey before all the marks of similitude. He is the hero of the Same. He never manages to escape from the familiar plain stretching out on all sides of the Analogue, any more than he does from his own small province. He travels endlessly over that plain, without ever crossing the clearly defined frontiers of difference, or reaching the heart of identity. Moreover, he is himself a sign, a long, thin graphism, a letter that has just escaped from the open pages of a book. His whole being is nothing but language, text, printed pages, stories that have already been written down. He is made up of interwoven words; he is writing itself, wandering through the world among the resemblance of things. Yet not entirely so: for in his reality as an impoverished hidalgo he can become a knight only by listening from afar to the age-old epic that gives its form to Law. The book is not so much his existence as his duty. He is constantly obliged to consult it in order to know what to do or say, and what signs he should give himself and others in order to show that he really is of the same nature as the text from which he springs. The chivalric adventures have provided once and for all a written prescription for his adventures.

(Foucault 2002, 51–52)

Seen through this lens, Don Quixote is not the ex-centric hero that we have often wanted to see, but rather a man-of-the-center in a world in a centrifugal maelstrom where references tend to escape from their origin at an accelerated pace. The hero Don Quixote greatly internalizes the tension that arises in a changing world when we are unable to adapt to it.<sup>7</sup> Reluctant to be dragged by the turn of the tide, the *hidalgo* or local aristocrat Alonso Quijano invokes restorative action. Between 1799 and 1801 Ludwig Tieck translated *Don Quixote* for the Romantic movement into German and interpreted the Quixotic concept of “deed” as *Tathandlung* (literally: action by deed) in a clear allusion to Fichte’s idealism.<sup>8</sup> Even the very Turgenev, in *Hamlet and Don Quixote*, explained the antinomian typology between inactive reflection and idealistic and practical activity. Against the dreadful hollowness opened in the board of signification, the solution is action. Direct action. In his *Meditations on Quixote* of 1914, Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset described this imperative of action as the “will to adventure”, i.e., a decision of strength (“Enchanters may deprive me of Good fortune, but of spirit and courage, never!” [Cervantes 2003, I, 565]) that tries to bring reality back to the lost correspondence:

In this will for adventure, in this effort and courage, we come across a strange dual nature, whose two elements belong to opposite worlds: the will is real but what is willed is not real.

(Ortega y Gasset 1963, 148)

This claim of synthesis of elements dissociated by the journey of action is not a principle of pleasure but a constituent of *must-be*,<sup>9</sup> which is something that is quite different from the heroes that preceded him.<sup>10</sup> Split reality into two separate worlds, the labors of the modern hero aim to reunite reality with itself. The knight-errant’s constant allusions to a “golden age” as a referential horizon are not for nothing.<sup>11</sup> These politics of origin are defended by the hero to the point of violence.

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As Foucault points out, “[Don Quixote’s] journey is a quest for similitudes: the slightest analogies are pressed into service as dormant signs that must be reawakened and made to speak once more” (2002, 52). Don Quixote observes reality through symbolic elements, and this earned him the nickname of “ingenious gentleman”. He has never seen Dulcinea, who exists only because he is a knight-errant,<sup>12</sup> but he commands every passer-by to recognize her absolute beauty. Likewise, an inn looks like a castle to him, or a nocturnal retinue of clergymen wearing surcoats and torches look like soldiers ready to attack with their breastplates and fires (Cervantes, I, 136). Obsessed with a transcendental unity, Don Quixote judges the real from the realm of the ideal; and when he realizes, to his regret, that they do not correspond, he labels this dissonance an “enchantment” (195). The

discourses and values assimilated by him in his nightly readings of chivalry books<sup>13</sup> are at the root of these epistemic abuses.<sup>14</sup> Cervantes' entire novel, adventure after adventure, is the confrontation between these projections and true reality, finally leading to a deeper melancholy upon realizing the impossibility of return. He goes from being a savior to being a "Knight of the Sorrowful Face". As Nietzsche would later express almost three centuries later,

A nihilist is someone who judges that the world as it is, it should *not* be, whereas the world as it should be, it is not. Hence, existence (action, suffering, desire, feeling) has no meaning; the pathos of the nihilist is the pathos of the "in vain". (1968, 585)

Ultimately, it was this contrast between external reality and individual symbolic existence that brought the hero closer to obsessive sociopathy and made him socially incapable of living in society:

And so, let it be said that this aforementioned gentleman spent his times of leisure—which meant most of the year—reading books of chivalry with so much devotion and enthusiasm that he forgot almost completely about the Hunt and even about the administration of his estate.

(Cervantes 2003, I, 20)

### *From Dostoevsky to Batman*

The character of Don Quixote is the first appearance in fiction of the modern hero for two reasons. The first has to do with form. Don Quixote inaugurates what Wolfgang Kayser has called the "character novel", that is, a novel focused on a single character:

It was the genius of Cervantes who founded the modern novel from this point of view. At first, Don Quixote was only an anti-hero for the adventures of the chivalric books, and readers of that time probably still saw the corresponding adventures from the chivalric novels behind most of his heroic deeds, whose world was thus ironized. But Cervantes gave his character the fullness, depth and coherence that made his work the immortal representative of the character novel.

(1948, 363)

And secondly, Don Quixote is the first modern hero in fiction because it is in these new adventures that "nihilism" is staged for the first time, namely as an internalized tension between being and duty. As Hans U. Gumbrecht has pointed out with fine accuracy, it is only under the conditions of dissociation between being and will that heroes become terrorists since "in terrorism resides [...] the modern possibility of heroism" (2009, 879). The

most popular of all the knight-errant's adventures—the one where Don Quixote takes the windmills for giants—reproduces this, with an added twist: from the exemplary readings of his chivalry books, Don Quixote assumes without further ado that the giants are in themselves guilty and therefore must be punished.<sup>15</sup> As seen in the previous chapter, this is a case, albeit still a primary one, of generalization from particularity<sup>16</sup>—a phenomenon that we now specify as a case of ideologization by dissociation and that reaffirms itself by continually referring to the blindness of others.<sup>17</sup>

This never-ending search for culprits who must be punished in the name of a greater justice—even if it means the transgression of the established legal order—is a defining feature of nihilist action stories. As a historical symptom, it runs transversally through all the restorative aspirations in modernity. In all these stories, their exceptionalist logic is that of “crime and punishment”, and we can find it diachronically both in Cervantes' depiction and in that of many of the idealistic heroes who followed him, from 18th-century fictional and polemical writings (Hanlon 2019) to those romantic heroes of a movement that “travelled beyond the confines of Germany to every country where there was some kind of social discontent and dissatisfaction, particularly to countries oppressed by small elites of brutal or oppressive or inefficient men, especially in Eastern Europe” (Berlin 1999, 131). At the core of the modern soul is the problem of the real/ideal split and the yearning (*Sehnsucht*) for the absolute—its imperative revolutionizing the present and transgressing it. As already noted, this curvature finally becomes aware of itself in Dostoevsky's work as the culmination of late modernity's reflection on itself.

This spirit of modernity does not end with the 19th century but rather extends its influence on its ascendants in the 20th century, including the products of the cultural industry. And so, the “crime and punishment” narratives expand their presence in their obscure bivalence: an idealist view where schism is the original crime, and heroic punishment is the redemption; and a Dostoevsky-like criticism where punishment itself is the crime, and salvation lies in repentance. Regarding the latter type of stories, we have, for example, the film adaptation of Patrick Hamilton's 1929 play *The Rope* (dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1948), or the characters Michel in *Pickpocket* (dir. Robert Bresson, 1959), Chris in *Match Point* (dir. Woody Allen, 2005) or Abe Lucas in *Irrational Man* (dir. Woody Allen, 2015). Even horror films such as *The Exorcist* (dir. William Friedkin, 1973) evidence the demonic possession of the young and innocent in the age of nihilistic loneliness.

Examples of the idealist narratives are even easier to locate since almost all the so-called “American heroes” have justified that dream of transcendence through transgression, from the western genre with the paradigmatic example of *The Man who Shot Liberty Valance* (dir. John Ford, 1962), the action cinema of the 1980s with their steppe soldiers (*Missing in action* [dir. Joseph Zito, 1984]; *Rambo: First Blood Part II* [dir. George P. Cosmatos, 1985]; *Die Hard* [dir. John McTiernan, 1988]), or the urban cinema: *Dirty*

*Harry* (dir. Don Siegel, 1971), *Death Wish* (dir. Michael Winner, 1974), *The Brave Man* (dir. Neil Jordan, 2007), etc., with special mention of *Taxi Driver* (dir. Martin Scorsese, 1976). Fantastic-epic cinema has also sought to legitimize these modes of restoration, as in the controversial destruction of the “Death Star” and its innumerable civilian casualties in *Star Wars* (dir. George Lucas, 1977). So has a part of mainstream animated cinema, such as Disney’s *Robin Hood* (dir. Wolfgang Reitherman, 1973) or Pixar’s *The Incredibles* (dir. Bard Bird, 2004).

And what about the comic book industry? What about the comic book hero, and Batman in particular? The relationship between nihilistic logic just described and figures in popular culture, such as Batman, seems plausible and we would not be the first to suggest it. In 2000, the comic author R. Sikoryak surprised the industry and critics with his publications in *Drawn and Quarterly* magazine, where he inverted the concept of the “pictorial turn” of *Classics Illustrated*. As the name of the masthead suggests, *Classics Illustrated* sought to make works of classical Western literature consumable in comic book form for younger or illiterate readers, thus subordinating comics to literature in the traditional sense.<sup>18</sup> Sikoryak, instead, called into question the controversial opposition between high and low culture. While it is true that the author adapted classic literary texts to the comic book medium, he did so in the stylistic forms of recognizable comics, drawing attention to the importance of comics as an independent artistic medium and thereby refuting its allegedly subsidiary format at the mere service of other major arts.<sup>19</sup> With an astonishing technical precision that recreated particular styles, Sikoryak adapted over several issues of *Drawn & Quarterly*, among others, Dante’s *Inferno* drawn à la *Bazzoka Joe*, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* in the form of *Little Lulu*, Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* as EC’s *Tales from the Crypt*, or Samuel Beckett’s *En attendant Godot* in the absurdist narrative of the celebrated MTV animated characters *Beavis and Butthead*. Sikoryak even compared Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* with Schulz’s *Peanuts*—with Charlie Brown waking up as an insect asking himself the same questions as Gregor Samsa—and an alien named *Superman* with Albert Camus’ *L’Étranger*. Many of these stories have been subsequently compiled in a 2009 hardcover entitled *Masterpiece Comics*, a volume whose format itself tries to reconstruct a silver age comic book with the same distribution of stories and advertisements, although now devoted to the game of meta-language: courses on Homeric literature instead of drawing lessons, classes for the understanding of cultural symbols instead of claims for young entrepreneurs, advertisements for toys based on classical literature, or the typical spaces dedicated to the reader’s mail in which simulated readers ask “Professor S.” (S. for Sikoryak) about the meaning of the comics and of the actions of the characters. One of these commercials, almost unnoticeable at first glance, imitates an advertisement for X-Ray scopes in which Sikoryak highlights his own program:

X-Ray Pics: an amazing literary discovery. Scholarly optical principle really works! Imagine holding a comic book in front of you. Reading closely allows you to “see” beneath the juvenile 4 color images to a world of deep emotional resonance and significant artistic merit. Look at all the friendly characters. Aren’t they somehow tragic now? Loads of laughs and fun at cocktail parties. Glasses not required.

(Sikoryak 2009, back cover)

Essentially, what Sikoryak seeks to signify with his symbolic repertoire (what he calls “World Literature Translated into Cartoon Parodies”) is the implicit relationship between certain general themes and their treatment in different media through shared narrative structures over time. He is not saying that there are graphic styles capable of telling a classic literary story better than others—as that would be to fall back into the trap of subordinating some media to others—but he tries to demonstrate that there are certain shared concerns that are addressed in the form of similar plots in one or another medium, regardless of whether these plots take the form of classical literature or mass culture. In an interview in 2010, Sikoryak recalls how “the real spark of excitement came when it occurred to me that there are parallels in the relationships of the characters in *Little Lulu* to the relationships of the characters in *The Scarlet Letter*”.<sup>20</sup> And Santiago García adds: “Putting Schulz’s Charlie Brown as the protagonist of Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* is so natural that in the preceding strip we hardly notice that poor Charlie Brown has become a beetle... Hasn’t he always been?”<sup>21</sup> We are talking about a sort of Faulknerian “pollen of ideas”.<sup>22</sup>

As for *Batman*, in *Drawn & Quarterly* #3, Sikoryak gives a metanarrative twist in the key (nothing more and nothing less) of Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*. With a keen associative eye, the author simulates the graphic and narrative style of Bob Kane and Dick Sprang in the 1950s to summarize, in just ten pages, the nineteenth-century novel. The story starts with a semi splash-page where we observe a Raskol/Wayne through an oblique angle locked in his personal “Bat-cave”. The nihilistic hollow is his dwelling place: just as we read in Dostoevsky that “[Raskolnikov’s] small room, more like a closet than an apartment, was tucked under the roof of a tall five-story building” (Dostoevsky 2018, 3), Wayne lives deep in thought, far from the gaze of the world, accompanied by bats and other inner demons. There he occupies his time writing a radical new idea that is meant to change the destiny of humanity:

On an exceptionally hot night, in an extremely small garret, sits the brilliant, poverty-stricken student known as Raskol! Pondering his miserable condition, he considers a desperate project to dramatically reverse his fortunes. What is his radical new idea? Who will stand in his way? Why will he attempt it at all? Here are the answers... in the story of... *Crime and Punishment!*

(Sikoryak 2009, 46)

As mentioned, the image refers directly to Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov in his room.<sup>23</sup> It also evokes Alonso Quijano in his library, and even engraving 43 of the *Caprichos* series by Goya. In the upper left corner is the classic Batman logo, although this time reworked as "Ras-kol" (in Russian: schism or split); on the wall, his shadow is projected as a bat (see Figure 4.1).

The next panels immediately bring us to the preliminaries of his action. The thought of the pain that the old moneylender Aliona pours on the most unprotected throws him into the night in search of justice, evoking that transformation scene when young Wayne uttered his famous "I shall become a bat":

The pawnbroker is the key! She's a stupid, ailing, evil woman who has nothing to live for—but with all her wealth, hundreds of desperate lives could be saved! It would be just to kill her and steal her fortune to use in the service of humankind! [And so, with a swift change of garb, Raskol emerges into the night!]

(Dostoevsky 2018, 47)

Dressed as a bat and with the emblem of an axe on his chest—we remember here Chernishevsky's words that "only the axe can save us, and nothing but the axe!"—the next panels take us directly to the execution of Aliona by Raskol/Wayne (see Figure 4.2).

In the original novel, Raskolnikov visualizes this moment in a dream in which the old woman responds to death with macabre laughter ("Rage overcame him; he began striking the old woman on the head with all his strength, but with each blow of the axe the laughter and whispering from the bedroom sounded stronger and louder, and the old woman shook with mirth") so it is no coincidence that in Sikoryak's transposition the victim is presented in the form of Batman's archenemy Joker. In both the comic and the novel, the hero comes to this question: "I asked myself, what would Napoleon do if he were in my position? Would he murder that ridiculous old woman if she stood in his way? Why, he wouldn't hesitate for a moment!" (53). And he responds with the conviction that "[e]xtraordinary men may transgress the law and eliminate obstacles which keep them from sharing their discoveries with the world" (51).

Raskol experiences the first moments of his crime with a certain triumph. However, after visiting Sonny/Robin (an orphan of the poor drunkard and friend of one of Raskol's victims) the hero Raskol soon realizes the depravity of his action. He then confesses his guilt, thus beginning his personal penance: "Did I murder those women? No, I murdered myself! What shall I do now?" (53). After confessing to Sonny/Robin, Raskol/Wayne goes to the police station of Inspector Porfiri/Gordon, where he hands over his mask. Thus concludes the comic created by Sikoriak, and "[t]hus begins a new story... of a man's gradual regeneration, of his journey into an unknown life... But our present story is ended! Don't miss our next issue!" (55).



Figure 4.1 Top left: Gustave Doré's engraving *L'ingénieux hidalgo don Quichotte de la Manche* (1863); top right: Goya's engraving 43 from *Caprichos* series (1799); bottom: Splash-Page from R. Sikoryak's "Dostoevsky Comics" ©2000 R. Sikoryak. Published in *Masterpiece Comics, Drawn and Quarterly*, 2009.



Figure 4.2 Sikoryak, R. "Dostoevsky Comics" ©2000 R. Sikoryak. Published in *Masterpiece Comics*, Drawn and Quarterly, 2009.

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Obviously, when it comes to interweaving both stories—Batman with Dostoevsky's—Sikoryak allows himself some license that would never happen in the case of the superhero. To begin with, Bruce Wayne would never hand over his mask or expose himself to a public trial because that

would mean the end of his adventures. But unlike Dostoevsky's closed novel, Batman is still a living and highly profitable product, which makes such a closure unimaginable. In one of the simulated reader's letters,<sup>24</sup> it is Sikoryak himself who discusses this problem:

Professor.

In DOSTOEVSKY COMICS, why does Raskol turn himself in? He's very clever. Couldn't he just escape from the cops?

—Nik Strakhov

Perhaps you were thinking of the nocturnal hero created by Bob Kane and Bill Finger in 1939. That winged-mammal-character is actually a rich American playboy who takes the law into his own hands to create a better world. In contrast, the protagonist of Fyodor Dostoevsky's 1866 serialized novel is a poor Russian student who takes the law into his own hands to create a better world. The parallels, even down to their respective supporting casts, are numerous and fascinating. For instance, Kane and Finger's hero, as a young boy, witnessed the murder of his parents, which inspired his battle for justice. Dostoevsky's hero dreams that, as a child, he saw the beating of a horse, which precedes his own violent actions. Still, only one of these characters has consistently avoided capture, and he's the one who has inspired a series of hit movies and television shows, as well as an incredibly successful line of action figures and fast food tie-ins.

(Sikoryak 2009, 65)

This means that the coincidence between the two stories—or rather, the Bat-narrative's pertaining to the general “crime and punishment” plot—does not occur in spite of their differences, but precisely because of them. Within their respective discourse, Batman is “crime and punishment”, just as “crime and punishment” is Batman, and it does not matter if the Bat-narrative leaves no room for his confession-surrender-salvation because, in the end, the salvific ideology of the modern knight-errant remains the same. Batman and Raskolnikov, like Don Quixote before them, give meaning to their existence by finding culprits to punish in the name of greater justice, even if it means transgressing the legal order. For the attentive reader, this also explains the recurrent allusion in the Batman corpus to Dostoevsky's novel (see e.g., DeMatteis 1995), along with the perennial characterization of the hero as a black knight with his saddle: the iconic Batmobile, or even a horse as such (see Figure 4.3).<sup>25</sup>

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From the knight-errant to the modern superhero via the Russian nihilistic hero, the three heroic figures just considered are exemplary cases of “crime and punishment” that present traits, scenes, motivations, and characters that align once put together. To begin with, three heroes share an abstract goal (universal justice) in specific *loci* (La Mancha, St. Petersburg, and Gotham City



Figure 4.3 Panel from *The Dark Knight Returns IV, "The Dark Knight Falls"* (1986). Written and penciled by Frank Miller; inked by Klaus Janson; colored by Lynn Varley and lettered by John Costanza. © DC Comics.

respectively). The hindrance is a local projection (the mills, the moneylender, and urban property crime). An accomplice helps them, although they may not always be necessarily committed to their methods. The confidant is their connection with society. Finally, they are occasionally accompanied by a figure of salvation, who at times bends their will and brings them back to reality. This isomorphism is displayed in Table 4.1.

But taking this approach does not entail, by any means, a return to a structuralist analysis such as that of monomythical readings. Any insistence is too little to discourage a return to those universalist methodologies that exhaust the specificity of each text. As we already know,<sup>26</sup> those readings were indebted to global anthropological assumptions while detaching the texts from any historicity, thereby diluting any distinctive contribution (aesthetic, ideological, etc.). A critical-material genealogy, on the contrary, must account for the processes of gestation of each text in its particular historical context. In the case of the three cases compared here, there is no reference to a diffuse anthropological

HERO	AIM	ENEMY	SIDE-KICK	CON-FIDANT	RES-CUER
Don Quixote	Universal Justice	Windmills, etc.	Sancho Panza	Bachelor Sansón Carrasco	Knight of the White Moon
Raskolnikov		Aliona	Razumihin	Porfiri	Sonya
Batman		Urban wrong-doers	Alfred	Gordon	Robin

universal, but they rather belong to a specific scenario from which they emerge as an expressive utterance. This is modern nihilism.

### Avengers: Resentment and Reaction

Whether his name is Don Quixote, Raskolnikov, or Batman, the modern hero's arrogance in unilaterally dispensing justice has consequences that, rather than solving the problem, contribute to aggravating it. As in previous chapters, it will again be the *Elseworld* narrative that can help us to understand this to the utmost degree. The excursus that follows this section will superimpose the myths of the Bat-Man and the Vampire-Man as the ultimate figures of doom and it will serve as a final brushstroke to what we have been discussing so far.

But before that, we cannot but delve into a series of fundamental traits of the psychology of the *typus* described throughout this chapter, traits that are at the root of his action and without whose study any analysis of a supposed (super) heroic "superman" would be suspiciously incomplete. As we pointed out, the reasons why the modern hero assumes the right to impart justice in a unilateral way are formulated in that famous Nietzschean chronology with the title "How the 'True World' Finally Became a Fiction. History of an Error".<sup>27</sup> According to that, Don Quixote is nostalgic for another time (moment 2) and resists (moment 3) this modern decentering (moment 4). He is not the usual eccentric hero, but rather the profoundly *centric* hero who opposes modern centrifuge acceleration and struggles to return to that point where the world was still the "true world" (moment 5). Don Quixote's promise was admirable, but time and again it proved to be unrealizable since it is no longer possible to recompose what has taken its own direction. By extension, we have diagnosed this pathology in the rest of the redemptive heroes of the nihilistic narrative of "crime and punishment" and we have seen in them a lacerating psychological picture that Nietzsche himself details in an illuminating description:

Nihilism as a psychological state will have to come about firstly when we have sought in everything that happens a "meaning" it doesn't contain, so that in the end the searcher loses courage. [...] That "*meanings*" might have been: the "fulfilment" of a highest canon of morality in all that happens, the moral order of the world [...].

Nihilism as a psychological state comes about secondly when a wholeness, a *systématisation*, even an organisation has been posited within and below everything that happens: so that the soul, hungering to admire and revere, now feasts on the total idea of a supreme form of dominion and administration [...]. Some kind of unity, any form of “monism:” and as a result of this belief, man feels deeply connected with and dependent on a whole that is infinitely superior to him, feels he is a mode of the deity... “The well-being of the whole demands the sacrifice of the individual” ...but behold, there *is* no such whole! At bottom, man loses his belief in his own value if he ceases to be the vehicle for an infinitely valuable whole [...].

Nihilism as a psychological state has a *third* and *last* form. [...] [G]iven these, there remains an *escape*: to condemn this whole world of becoming as a deception, and to invent a world that lies beyond it as the *true* world. But as soon as man realizes how that other world is merely assembled out of psychological needs and how he has absolutely no right to it, the last form of nihilism arises, one of which includes *disbelief in any metaphysical world*—which forbids itself belief in a *true* world. Having arrived at this standpoint, one admits that the reality of becoming is the *only* reality, forbids oneself every kind of secret route to worlds beyond and false divinities—but *cannot endure this world which one yet does not want to deny*...

(2003, 217–218)

We will talk about the third type of nihilism later when we address the question of the villain. For now, the other two forms of nihilism as a psychological state refer to that fundamental attitude observed in the modern hero. What is interesting to underline here is the relation of moments 2 to 4 of the above-mentioned chronology from *Twilight of the Idols* with the first two forms of nihilism just mentioned. In 1887, Nietzsche still described the nihilist as “someone who is of the judgment that the world as it is, ought *not* to be, and that the world as it ought to be, does not exist”. In essence, the ultimate source of nihilism is not the abandonment of reason, but precisely the extreme faith in its categories.<sup>28</sup> That extreme use of reason is what makes the modern hero a fanatic rather than a brainless eccentric. The curse of this demonic possession is formulated and self-justified as a duty of universal necessity with no room for contingency: the world is no longer what it was, but it *must* be again. We revisit here the original origin story oath when a young Wayne perfectly reproduces this ethic of duty (“I *must* be a creature of the night. A black, terrible, a... a... [...] A Bat!” [Kane 1939. Emphasis mine]) From Don Quixote to more contemporary examples, duty is a heavy burden that the hero gladly accepts upon himself.<sup>29</sup> This hero is reminiscent of the *camel* Nietzsche spoke of in the first part of his *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* of 1883:

What is heavy? thus asks the carrying spirit. It kneels down like a camel and wants to be well loaded.

(2006, 16)

Nolan's film *The Dark Knight* formulates this symbolism in a realistic way. After Harvey Dent suffers the loss of his fiancée and the disfigurement of half of his body at the hands of the Joker, he embarks on his personal vendetta as Two-Face against those who, by action or omission, had something to do with it. From a brilliant and incorruptible district attorney, Harvey transforms into a vile murderer who determines the fate of his victims by flipping a coin ("the only morality in a cruel world is chance"). Several are already his victims when, in the struggle to save Gordon's son from that random chance, Batman pushes Two-Face from the heights, who dies from the fall. Gordon's automatic impulse is to denounce the murders just perpetrated by Dent, even though he knows that doing so will call into question everything Dent achieved against crime by legal means and will give the Joker his triumph, proving we are all corruptible. Without hesitation, Batman proposes a better alternative:

GORDON: The Joker won.

[Gordon stares down at SCARRED SIDE of Harvey Dent]

GORDON: Harvey's prosecution, everything he fought for, everything Rachel died for. Undone. Whatever chance Gotham had of fixing itself... whatever chance you gave us of fixing our city... dies with Harvey's reputation. We bet it all on him. The Joker took the best of us and tore him down. People will lose all hope.

BATMAN: No. They won't. They can never know what he did. [...] Gotham needs its true hero.

[Gently, he turns Dent's head so the good side of his face is up. Gordon looks from Dent's face to Batman. Understanding]

GORDON: You? You can't—

BATMAN: Yes, I can... You either die a hero or live long enough to see yourself become the villain. I can do those things because I'm not a hero, like Dent. I killed those people. That's what I can be.

GORDON [Angry]: No, you can't! You're not!

BATMAN: I'm whatever Gotham needs me to be.

These words then give way to an intense scene which cuts to Batman running away from the police. "Why's he running, Dad?" Gordon's son asks his father. Gordon answers: "Because he can take it. Because he's not our hero. He's a silent guardian, a watchful protector. A dark knight."

The term "dark knight" has acquired a new connotation, for it comes to mean the one who saves us by willingly taking the blame in darkness. If the calculation dictates it, the hero is no longer a hero, but a necessary villain. With this public lie, Batman disappears completely from scene while

Gotham manages to survive another eight years. But how long can a lie be hidden, and what will happen when it finally comes out?

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The hero *must*, even at the risk of his own dissolution. As Nietzsche would pose it, he is the champion of “ascetic ideals” (Nietzsche 1989, 97–163). This implies a renunciation of the most basic vital impulses, including those of pleasure, and it stoically defines his rough and dour features, his constrained form wrapped in his dark protective cloak. Pain for him is not an impediment but a constitutive blessing.<sup>30</sup> Just like any other modern hero, Batman is a social cripple, unable to laugh.<sup>31</sup> He is also incapable of love: he has no known partner and no interest in finding one.<sup>32</sup> This lack is not new to the critics, who have manipulated it to the extreme of a supposedly repressed homosexuality (Wertham 1954, 189–190; Legman 1949). This subaltern reading, so widespread in the case of Batman that it was even endorsed by Umberto Eco (Eco 1972, 18). But as Frank Miller correctly clarifies,

Batman isn't gay. His sexual urges are so drastically sublimated into crime-fighting that there's no room for any other emotional activity. Notice how insipid are the stories where Batman has a girlfriend or some sort of romance. It's not because he's gay, but because he's borderline pathological, he's obsessive. He'd be much healthier if he were gay.

(Miller in Sharett 2015, 36)<sup>33</sup>

The indisputable asocial behavior of the superhero has more to do with a conscious decision that impedes any surrender to pleasure. When he studied Superman, Umberto Eco called this vow of chastity the “parsifalism”, in honor of the Arthurian hero worthy of seeking the Holy Grail and of whom Nietzsche himself claimed to go against nature (Nietzsche 1977, 675). Superman's parsifalism is “one of the conditions that prevents his slowly ‘consuming’ himself, and it protects him from the events, and therefore from the passing of time, connected with erotic ventures” (Eco 18).

For a genealogical hermeneutic, however, this trait is intrinsic not only to Superman but to every modern avenger as an ascetic renunciation of everything that could distract them from their objective. Don Quixote was “the most chaste lover and most valiant knight seen in those environs for many years” (Cervantes 2003, I, 8–9). Raskolnikov poeticized Sergey Nechayev's revolutionary catechism when the latter said “[t]he revolutionary is a doomed [обреченный] man. He has no interest of his own, no affairs, no feelings, no attachments, no belongings, not even a name. Everything in him is absorbed by a single exclusive interest, a single thought, a single passion—the revolution” (Nechayev 1989, 4. Trans. mod.) Sherlock Holmes renounced the emotional qualities as antagonistic to clear reasoning.<sup>34</sup> In the midst of the 20th and 21st centuries, Batman still rejects

any carnal adventure,<sup>35</sup> and he admits: “Like Parsifal, I must confront the unreason that threatens me” (Morrison 2004, 84). Deprivation, castration, purity and physical-spiritual martyrdom of the modern hero are a toll for the transmundane<sup>36</sup>—a preliminary step to the totalitarian denial of life, as when Nazism asserted that “the national comrade is to have no private life and above all he must give up his private skittles club” (“SoPaDe report from November 1935”, in Noakes and Pridham 1984, 575).

But, in addition, this “will to nothingness” conceals something else: behind it lurks an unhealthy *resentment*. As Ryan Litsey has noted, “Ressentiment is a profound concept and one that the character of Batman embodies” (2015, 187). Such resentment is at every point an expression of weakness, a vindictive reaction to the inability to put power at the true service of life. The modern hero is nothing more than the ultimate executor of an entire retaliatory operative, hence the tag “avenger”, which Marvel Comics later made their own as part of their universe (*Avengers, New Avengers, Uncanny Avengers*, etc.). As the philosopher Eugen Dühring had already identified in 1865, the so-called sense of justice is in fact “a resentment, a reactive feeling, belonging to the same genus as revenge” (1865, 219). In 1883, Nietzsche expanded this analysis:

Oh, how foul the word “virtue” sounds coming from their mouths! And when they say: “I am just”, [*ich bin gerecht*] then it sounds always like: “I am just avenged [*ich bin gerächt*]!”

(2006, 73)

For Nietzsche, this resentment is a disposition of the imagination, when the offended person seeks satisfaction in a series of substitute actions that cannot restore the lost happiness but can instead alleviate the pain of its loss. “Just why do you do what you do? It doesn’t seem like the sort of lifelong dedication that one makes arbitrarily! Is that what it’s all about, Batman? A personal vendetta from your own tortured past?” Mr. Freeze asks Batman in the *No Man’s Land* story arc (Hama 1999). “You play the hand you’re dealt. What I am, I am of my own choice. I don’t know if I’m happy, but I’m content”, Batman answers (Barr 1991. III). The hero’s “mis-anthropocentric vengeance” as it was put by Steranko (1970, 44) is a free decision made by one who becomes obsessed with the repayment of a debt once he cannot continue building on what he has been left with. Behind the hero’s apparent altruism and generosity lie usury and stinginess, as well as a permanent settling of scores and an insatiable need for compensation.

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This “vengefulness of the impotent” (Nietzsche 1989, 37) triggers a whole series of ideological transposition mechanisms (taking one thing for another, universalization, and self-deception of deduction, etc.) that make heroes “social engineers, imposing order, teaching lessons, and then calling that

order or those lessons natural or commonsensical” (Kahan and Steward 2006, 126). As Nietzsche disclosed in his *On Genealogy of Morals* from 1887, any morality that is too weak to stand out on its own but is still too proud to disappear tends to nullify the validity of other morals and to naturalize its own impulses as universal virtues. Its notion of triumph is to prevail alone on the playing field. To do so, it changes the terms of the valuation of facts by falsifying otherness (bad is good, good is bad) until it succeeds in expelling from the game all those who disagree. Difference is stigmatized, and the world is *reactively* totalized:

The slave revolt in morality begins when *ressentiment* itself becomes creative and gives birth to values: the *ressentiment* of natures that are denied the true reaction, that of deeds, and compensate themselves with an imaginary revenge. While every noble morality develops from a triumphant affirmation of itself, slave morality from the outset says No to what is “outside”, what is “different”, what is “not itself”; and *this* No is its creative deed. This inversion of the value-positing eye—this *need* to direct one’s view outward instead of back to oneself—is the essence of *ressentiment*. In order to exist, slave morality always first needs a hostile external world; it needs, physiologically speaking, external stimuli in order to act at all—its action is fundamentally reaction.

Nietzsche continues:

The reverse is the case with the noble method of valuation: it acts and grows spontaneously. It seeks its opposite only to affirm itself even more gratefully and triumphantly—its negative concept “low”, “common”, “bad” is only a subsequently-invented pale, contrasting image in relation to its positive basic concept—filled with life and passion through and through—“we noble ones, we good, beautiful, happy ones!”  
(1989, 36–37).

The dispositif of resentment articulates for the weak a morality that is not intended to create independently, sovereignly, and spontaneously, but to neutralize any possible threat. In case of injury, we all can either grow or respond. But the hero always responds on the defensive. The fact that, as Coogan says, “[i]n a narrative sense, villains are proactive and heroes are reactive. The villain’s machinations drive the plot. The hero reacts to the villain’s” (Coogan 2006, 101), has to do with a moral psychology that censures affirmation over negation, creation over destruction, strength over abuse, joy over pain. “They are all men of *ressentiment*, physiologically unfortunate and worn-eaten, a whole tremulous real of subterranean revenge” (Nietzsche 1989, 124). The weak conspire against the strong and make them believe they are worthless. The sick rule over the healthy and empty their land:

What is to be feared, what has a more calamitous effect than any other calamity, is that man should inspire not profound fear but profound *nausea*; also not great fear but great *pity*. Suppose these two were one day to unite, they would inevitably beget one of the uncanniest monsters: the “last will” of man, his will to nothingness, nihilism. And indeed a great deal points to this union.

(122)

Superpowered “action” heroes participate in this nihilism and amplify it. Their narratives constantly misuse the term “Superman”, as they do not speak of a transhuman—that is, one who will utter a triumphant YES over a decaying moral—but about the “last man” roaming Europe (Heidegger 2014, 239). Whether or not superheroic narratives have the potential for *real action*, we will have to wait until the next chapter to find out.

Those who are failures from the start, downtrodden, crushed—it is they, the *weakest*, who must undermine life among men, who call into question and poison most dangerously our trust in life, in man, and in ourselves. Where does one not encounter that veiled glance which burdens one with a profound sadness, that in ward-turned glance of the born failure which betrays how such a man speaks to himself—that glance which is a sigh!

(Nietzsche 1989, 122)

### Excursus: Batman Gothic (Variations on a Romantic Theme)

A ghost haunts Europe—the ghost of nihilism. In dormancy since the first modernity, nihilism has been a sensation that has developed over the last four centuries and has slightly defined a large part of Western cultural production. From Goya’s Black Paintings to Mary Shelley’s magnum opus, it was the very contemporaries of the romantic dream who dared to denounce it. The typology of the savior hero glorifies the imperative of restitutive action. But contaminated by a dishonest narcissism fatally self-absorbed in its delirium, it is a reactive action that drags us irremissibly into the abyss. The modern hero is a modern Prometheus who will end up setting the world on fire out of enthusiasm. The dream of reason becomes a nightmare.

This excursus will attempt to complete the figuration traced throughout this chapter by explaining the relationship between the nihilistic hero and the shadows cast by the romantic fire. To this end, it will put him in dialogue with the Gothic novel, which was, after all, the natural counterpoint to classical Romanticism. From illustrated possessed demons to authentic supernatural monstrosities, the following lines will voice the curse inherited from all those heroes who, in their yearning for justice, only invoke terror and destruction—those who protagonize *in extremis* a “tragic-fantastic” realism as a narrative style of the depths of modernity.<sup>37</sup>

On April 16, 1793, the German Jacobin Georg Forster predicted:

The reign, or rather the tyranny, of reason, perhaps the most iron of all, is yet to come to the world. [...] The nobler the thing and the more excellent, the more diabolical the abuse. Burnings and flooding, the harmful effects of fire and water, are nothing against the mischief that reason will cause.

(1843, 12)

A few years earlier, in 1764, Horace Walpole inaugurated with his *The Castle of Otranto* what we know today as Gothic literature: a new type of fiction that capitalized on the anguish at the failure of the modern ideal of universal justice and happiness. From the—at first—barely visible flaws of the modern dream of reunion and totality, swarms of monsters end up escaping, eventually cracking its once promising edifice. Edgar Allan Poe's 1839 short story *The Fall of the House of Usher* functions for all intents and purposes as a metaphor for the end of a blinding worldview drowned in its own contradictions:

Shaking off from my spirit what must have been a dream, I scanned more narrowly the real aspect of the building. Its principal feature seemed to be that of an excessive antiquity. The discoloration of ages had been great. Minute fungi overspread the whole exterior, hanging in a fine tangled web-work from the eaves. Yet all this was apart from any extraordinary dilapidation. No portion of the masonry had fallen; and there appeared to be a wild inconsistency between its still perfect adaptation of parts, and the crumbling condition of the individual stones. In this there was much that reminded me of the specious totality of old wood-work which has rotted for long years in some neglected vault, with no disturbance from the breath of the external air. Beyond this indication of extensive decay, however, the fabric gave little token of instability. Perhaps the eye of a scrutinizing observer might have discovered a barely perceptible fissure, which, extending from the roof of the building in front, made its way down the wall in a zigzag direction, until it became lost in the sullen waters of the tarn.

(1990, 89–90)

The Bat-narrative participates in this discussion. In fact, as Bundrick claimed, “Batman is the protagonist of his own Gothic narrative” (2011, 33). The character's design (pointed mask, dark cloak with winged shape, stalking from the darkness), his *modus operandi* (“to strike terror in their [criminal] hearts” [Kane 1939]) the characterization of his enemies (cat-women, crocodile-men, penguin-men, demon-men, etc.) or his own origin story loaded with tombs and oaths, all give evidence of this connection. Gothic settings are reproduced almost literally in Gotham City, cursed

because in them the past dwells alongside the present: mansions and family pantheons, dark alleys stained with blood, watchful gargoyles, unreachable domes of impossible lines threatening to plummet, etc. Gotham is the land of our nightmares. All this topology of the macabre is an inherent feature in Batman, and since the creation of the detective genre by Edgar Allan Poe, it is perfectly compatible with the strictly rational elements of his nature.<sup>38</sup> Batman is the monster who has come to haunt you at night.

It is not surprising that many Batman authors have delved into this evocative dimension. The best example is probably Tim Burton's staging in his two Batman films from 1989 and 1992. Among the printed material, we can especially mention one of Batman's first stories, where he confronts the vampire "The Monk" (*Detective Comics* #31–32, 1939) as well as its contemporary revision in the *Dark Moon Rising* series *Batman and the Mad Monk* (October 2006–March 2007); the story arc *Batman and the Monster Men* (January–June 2006) as a prequel to the aforementioned revision; the arc *Gothic* (*Legends of the Dark Knight* #6–10, April–August 1990), based largely on the 1796 Gothic novel *The Monk* by M. G. Lewis, or *Werewolf* (*Legends of the Dark Knight* #71–73, May–July 1995), where Detective Batman travels from Gotham to old Europe to solve a series of murders perpetrated by werewolves; as well as several *Elseworlds* stories such as *The Doom That Came to Gotham* (November 2000–January 2001), *Batman: Nosferatu* (March 1999), *Batman: Masque* (1997) as a pseudo-adaptation of *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra*, or the approaches of Doug Moench and Kelley Jones *Batman: Dark Joker—The Wild* (November 1993), and *Batman: Haunted Gotham* (February–May 2000). With greater or lesser success, the explicitly Gothic forms of these works underscore an idea ever-present in the Bat-narrative, namely, that "[t]o face and fight the terror, you must become terror... ever fighting yourself" (Moench 2000, #2).

It is therefore worthwhile to examine for a moment the work of those last two authors as a metaphorical culmination of the analysis of our last two chapters. It is the so-called "Batman & Dracula trilogy", later renamed for a trade paperback as *Tales of the Multiverse: Batman—Vampire*. In the public domain since 1962, industrial culture had already made Bram Stoker's Count the protagonist of many of its stories, but the comic book industry could not make use of the vampire until the relaxation of the Comic Code in 1971, at which point Marvel Comics began to release a monthly series drawn by Gene Colan (*The Tomb of Dracula*, 1972–1979). Thereafter, this spectrum also began to play a role in Batman stories.<sup>39</sup> However, despite the obvious kinship—after all, a vampire is just a hematophagous bat—Batman and Dracula had never shared a stage except for the (unauthorized) film version shot in 1964 by the artist Andy Warhol.<sup>40</sup> With *Batman & Dracula: Red Rain* (1991), *Batman: Bloodstorm* (1994), and *Batman: Crimson Mist* (1999), the publication of Moench and Kelley "Batman & Dracula trilogy" in compliance with the standards of the genre was therefore an inaugural event in the history of this connection.

The plot of the first part of the trilogy *Batman & Dracula: Red Rain* is as follows: Gotham City is the scene of a crime spree that takes place in unusual circumstances, as the victims are all found drained of blood and with strange marks on their necks. Detective Batman soon discovers that they are the work of an army of vampires, commanded by Dracula himself. Given the strength and resources of such an enemy, to fight him on equal terms the hero is forced to seal a pact whereby he himself converts to vampirism—a lesser evil arrangement, with the utmost care to feed only on artificial blood and never on human blood. The strategy is successful, and Dracula is finally defeated. Unfortunately, all this means the death of Bruce Wayne... “but the Batman will go on... forever”. Ahead of the suspicion, Batman believes that the pact that has led to Dracula’s destruction was a necessary pact from which nothing needs to be feared. Because “[v]ampires are real... but not all of them... evil” (Moench 1991).

In *Red Rain*, Batman seems to have his “blood curse” successfully under control. But in the rest of the trilogy, this pact with the devil begins to poison his hands and to be questioned. After a new epidemic of vampirism, Batman’s fury is finally unleashed in *Batman: Bloodstorm*.

CARDONA: How can you kill me? You’re a vampire yourself!

BATMAN: I’m not like you, Cardona.

CARDONA: You’re somehow better than the rest of us?

BATMAN: Yesss.

CARDONA: Not anymore you ain’t! The old Batman never killed! Now you’re a one-man holocaust killing every night!

BATMAN: Eliminating you from Gotham is not killing...you’re not even alive.

CARDONA: Neither are you... but it feels the same, don’t it? Hah? Feels better!

BATMAN: You’re undead.

CARDONA: Ditto, gink!

BATMAN: I am not like you! I don’t take blood!

(Moench 1994)

From “knight-errant” to “walking holocaust”, the superhero’s presumption of superiority over others is once again evident here. Even though he himself is one of them, Batman considers it justified to exterminate all vampires because he is not like them as he does not drink blood. As long as he resists the call of the blood and manages to survive on manufactured artificial plasma, he will not succumb to the disease and will not become what he fights against. Selina Kyle’s unconditional love helps him to endure at all times.

But this supposed guarantee of legitimacy crumbles when Batman discovers that the new outbreak is a plan hatched by the Joker to devastate Gotham City and corrupt its soul. With Selina Kyle murdered by his arch-enemy, Batman loses everything that still connects him to humanity. With no more strength in himself, he transgresses the one rule he has always

sworn to uphold: to kill in the name of justice. Prometheus is then unchained. By offering himself as bait, the Joker manages to put Batman against the ropes, awakening in him a rage that will eventually revoke the terms by which he had proclaimed his superiority:

BATMAN [to himself]: A single blow snaps his neck. His head flops back, exposing a pale expanse of throat, broken but still pulsing... I fall on it, lips unsheathing fangs of savage hunger... No! Can't succumb! Must fight it...! And yet... Selinas's love was all that held me back... kept me strong. Now that love is forever lost... because he destroyed it. And so, in the end, rattling his last laugh... the Joker wins.

(Ibidem)

In the end, Batman drinks Joker's blood. And so a new journey of blood begins in which the Bat-Man is no better than Dracula himself. Cardona's prediction that sooner or later he would eventually give in is met, "[b]ecause it's everything you always pretended to be... for real!" From the hero Gotham deserved to the hero Gotham needed, the only possible way out is through the hero's own death. Following Batman's ultimate wishes, Alfred and Gordon reluctantly consummate all the preparations to drive a stake through his heart and leave him prostrate forever in a coffin.

But if *Batman: Bloodstorm* narrates the death of Batman as the price of his last triumph/failure (the murder of the Joker as a necessary evil), that is not all Moench and Jones have to offer on this Gothic curse. With Batman finally out of the Gotham night scene, in *Batman: Crimson Mist* the classic villains of the Bat-narrative (Two-Face, Poison Ivy, Penguin, Scarecrow, Killer Croc, and Black Mask) take the opportunity to occupy the empty space and seize power in the city. In this last act of the trilogy, the authors raise the need to recover the pact with evil in the quest for a greater good. As Gordon is finally forced to admit, the only way to stop the new plague of criminals is to "cut off their heads". To do so, they must resurrect Batman from his undefined slumber and let him become what he has always repudiated.

Newly invoked, the bat is already a bloodthirsty demon out of control: "I will destroy them all—feed on them, one by one, until they are drained dry... and the best you can hope is that I prevent them from returning as monsters at my side" (Moench 1999, 26). Batman then says to himself:

Whether demon or dark god, I soar and swoop to the cave—once a man's sanctuary, now the antechamber to a monster's hell. Cursed by Dracula's kiss and the Joker's blood, I am beyond redemption, and soon to pass beyond caring. Thereafter I will become scornful of redemption—and ultimately opposed to its very meaning. I am a beast of the pit and even the darkness of this foul stone womb pales against my shadow.

(63)

The blood pact has finally put Batman at a point of no return. The city needs him to face this new threat. But what happens next, and won't the city itself be compromised?

Resisting evil is no longer possible, not when it tempts so seductively and offers such power. Having tasted blood, I cannot stop taking it. Red of fang and claw, black of heart, I have become the ultimate predator—with only Two-face and Killer Croc remaining as acceptable prey. After them, there's nothing but Blackgate... many of whose inmates are imprisoned for nothing but theft or less. They do not deserve my crimson mist. And after them... Gotham will be cleansed, its streets and shadows holding too little to sustain me. With nothing but a random criminal here and there, I would be forced to prey on innocents—just as Riddler and Scarecrow did. And how long before I can no longer bear the loneliness? How long before I stop taking their heads? How long before I start taking brides? Before I spawn a “family” even larger than the Cult of Dracula? The evil I've taken into my veins has already seeped into whatever remains of my soul—corrupting and devouring its last remnants of decency. I have lost all life, and so I steal it. I am death, and so I bring it.

(64–66)

The path of redemption is a treacherous labyrinth that runs through dark dungeons. Once blood is tasted, there is no turning back. From Nolan's film trilogy to Moench and Jones' *Batman & Dracula* trilogy, we see again and again how the dark alliance that the city establishes with the hero can only end in a minimally tolerable way if it presupposes the hero's own dissolution. Legality can only be exceptionally suspended if it is eventually restored; otherwise, the voids created will be filled by the very evil that it claimed to fight. But: is it possible to go back? There is nothing but void and compensation. The law of communicating vessels is now filled with blood...

Billions, Gordon, one crimson feast after another... Oceans of blood...  
Until the whole world is drained dry.

(87)

## Notes

- 1 “The word ‘nihilist’ I had used in my novel was taken advantage of by a great many people who were only waiting for an excuse, a pretext, to put a stop to the movement which had taken possession of Russian society. But I never used that word as a pejorative term or with any offensive aim, but as an exact and appropriate expression of a fact, an historic fact, that had made its appearance among us; it was transformed into a means of denunciation, unhesitating condemnation and almost a brand of infamy” (Turgenev 1958, 200).

- 2 The first to develop this thesis of confrontation was Pjotr J. Tschaadajew (1794–1896). His starting observation was that “[the Russian people] have no tradition, no history cultivated by our people. We exist without a past and without a future. Isolated from the rest of mankind, we lack our own development, real progress. The ideas of obligation, of justice and order which constitute the atmosphere of the West, do not apply to us [...]. Confusion is a common trait among our people [...]” Tschaadajew, P. J., “Первое письмо”, *Телескоп*, no. 15 Moscow, 1836. The same can be found in Aleksey Khomyakov (1804–1860), Ivan Kireyevsky (1806–56), or Konstantin Aksakov (1817–60).
- 3 At the end of Turgenev’s novel, Bazarov dies of a typhus infection without having known how to take the definitive step from idea to praxis. Later, in a speech delivered on January 10th, 1860, the author will call this “Hamletism”: knowing but not acting (Turgenev 1964).
- 4 “A building, an enormous, enormous building, such as are now in but a few capitals and those the very largest – or no, there is not a single one like it now! It stands in the midst of fields and meadow, gardens and woods [...] And that building, that kind of architecture is already hinted at in the palace that stands on Sydeham Hill Glass and steel, steel and glass, and that is all. No, that is not all, that is only the shell of the building, that is its exterior walls. But there, inside, there is a real house, an enormous house. It is covered by this cristal and steel building as by the sheath. It is surrounded by broad galleries on every floor. [...] But how rich all this is! Aluminium everywhere, and all the spaces between windows are hung with mirrors. And what rugs on the floor! [...] And there are tropical trees and flowers everywhere. The whole house is a huge winter garden” (Chernishevsky, *Что делать?* Quoted in Frank 1986, 289).
- 5 “Can this finally be the accomplished ideal?” one thinks. Is not this the end? Is not this really the ‘one herd’? Will we not have to take this as really the entire truth, and remain mute once and for all? All this is so triumphant, so proud and consciously victorious that it takes your breath away. You observe all these hundreds of thousands, these millions of people, obediently flowing here from the entire world... This is some sort of Biblical image, something out of Babylon, some sort of prophecy out of the Apocalypse, taking place right before one’s eyes. You feel that eternal spiritual resistance and negation is necessary not to surrender, not to submit to the impression, not to bow down before the fact and deify Baal, that is, not to accept the existing as the ideal...” (Dostoevsky, *Полное собрание сочинений*, 69–70. Quoted in Frank 1963, 243).
- 6 “There is no difference between marks and words in the sense that there is between observation and accepted authority, or between verifiable fact and tradition. The process is everywhere the same: that of the sign and its likeness, and this is why nature and the word can intertwine with one another to infinity, forming, for those who can read it, one vast single text” (37).
- 7 “When I consider this, I am prepared to say that it grieves my very soul that I have taken up the profession of knight-errant in an age as despicable as the one we live in now [...]” (Cervantes 2003, I, 333).
- 8 From the verb *do*, the English word *deed* comes from Proto-Germanic \**dēdiz* and Proto-Indo-European \**dʰéh₂tis* (See Hoad 1996). It is noteworthy that the translation in English for deed has a static meaning, lacking the connotation of performance and great achievement through action which is present in Tieck’s translation into German.
- 9 “And so we learn that acting is the soul of the world; not enjoying ourselves, not becoming sentimental or sophisticated, but only through it [action] do we become God-like” (Lenz 1987, II, 638).
- 10 As Ortega reminds: “The men of Homer belong to the same world as their desires” (Ortega y Gasset 1963, 148).

- 11 “[...] I was born, by the Will of heaven, in this our iron age, to revive the one of gold, or the Golden Age” (Cervantes 2003, I, 150; see also I, 76–77).
- 12 “God knows if Dulcinea exists in the world or not, or if she is imaginary or not imaginary; these are not the kinds of things whose verification can be carried through to the end” (Cervantes 2003, II, 672).
- 13 “In short, our gentleman became so caught up in reading that he spent his nights reading from dusk till dawn and his days reading from sunrise to sunset, and so with too little sleep and too much reading his brains dried up, causing him to lose his mind.[...] The truth is that when his mind was completely gone, he had the strangest thought any lunatic in the world ever had, which was that it seemed reasonable and necessary to him, both for the sake of his honor and as a service to the nation, to become a knight-errant and travel the world with his armor and his horse to seek adventures and engage in everything he had read that knights errant engaged in, righting all manner of wrongs and, by seizing the opportunity and placing himself in danger and ending those wrongs, winning eternal renown and everlasting fame” (Cervantes 2003, I, 21).
- 14 “[E]verything he saw he very easily accommodated to his chivalric nonsense and errant thoughts” (Cervantes 2003, I, 154).
- 15 “Flee not, cowards and base creatures, for it is a single knight who attacks you [...] Even if you move more arms than the giant Briareus, you will answer to me” (Cervantes 2003, I, 59).
- 16 See *infra*, chapter 3, § “Whodunit?”: Batman, Holmes, and the Hermeneutics of Detection.
- 17 “Ah, Señor!” said his niece. “Your grace should remember that everything you say about knights errant is invention and lies, and each of their histories, if it isn’t burned, deserves to wear a sanbenito or some other sign that it has been recognized as the infamous ruination of virtuous customs.” “By the God who sustains me” said Don Quixote, “[...] How is it possible that a mere slip of a girl who barely knows how to manage twelve lace bobbins can dare to speak against and censure the histories of the knight-errants?” (Cervantes 2003, II, 493).
- 18 “Because of their educational function, the *Classic Illustrated* pages are less self-assured about their comic book form, so they segregate the words and pictures and eschew sound effects entirely” (Witek 1989, 44; see also Jones 2002).
- 19 On this, see Versaci, 2007, 205–208.
- 20 In: <http://thedailycrosshatch.com/tag/r-sikoryak/> [retrieved on July 20, 2022].
- 21 In: <http://santiagogarciablog.blogspot.com/2009/10/si-esto-fuera-un-clasico.html> [retrieved on July 14, 2022]. Umberto Eco said about Schulz’s creations: “These children [...] are the monstrous infantile reductions of all the neuroses of a modern citizen of the industrial civilization” (1994, 40).
- 22 “[...] [T]here must be a sort of pollen of Ideas floating in the air, which fertilizes similarly minds here and there which have not had direct contact” (Faulkner 1968, 30–31).
- 23 “He often slept on it [a large, ungainly sofa] as he was, without undressing, without a sheet, covering himself with his old shabby student’s overcoat [...] It was hard to sink lower or become more slovenly, but Raskolnikov found this aspect even pleasant in his current frame of mind. He had definitely withdrawn from everyone, like a turtle into its shell, and even the face of the servant, who was obliged to wait on him and who would sometimes enter his room, aroused his bile and occasioned tremors. That sometimes happens to those monomaniacs who are too focused on something” (Dostoevsky 2018, 30–31).
- 24 On the concept of comic book letter column, see *supra*, chapter 6, § An Exercise in Polyphonic Reading in the Superheroic Comic Book (II): *Luthor... You Are Driving Me Sane*.
- 25 On this motif, see Nass 1992; Bundrick 2011.

- 26 See *infra*, chapter 1, § How is Knowledge Possible in the Case of Comic Book Hermeneutics?
- 27 See *infra*, this chapter, § The Knight-errant vs. the Displacement of the Modern Episteme.
- 28 “[B]elief in the categories of reason is the cause of nihilism—we have measured the value of the world against categories that refer to a purely invented world” (Nietzsche 2003, 219).
- 29 “I give thanks to heaven for the great mercy it has shown in so quickly placing before me opportunities to fulfill what I owe to my profession, allowing me to gather the fruit of my virtuous desires” (Cervantes 2003, I, 35).
- 30 “[Batman’s been bitten by Croc] GORDON: Are you in pain? BATMAN: I work through pain” (Kubooka 2008).
- 31 “And so, let it be said that this aforementioned gentleman spent his times of leisure—which meant most of the year—reading books of chivalry with so much devotion and enthusiasm that he forgot almost completely about the Hunt and even about the administration of his estate” (Cervantes 2003, I, 20); “Raskolnikov was not accustomed to the crowd, and as has already been said, he’d been avoiding any social contact, especially of late” (Dostoevsky 2018, 12).
- 32 “Batman would be quite incapable of sustaining a relationship with a woman” (Morrison, 2004, “Full Script and Notes”, 61).
- 33 As Michael Brody also writes: “The issue of Batman is not one of sexual orientation, but more of a question of balance. There is a lack of sexual interest, all sublimated into his rage and crime-fighting” (Brody 1995, 176).
- 34 See *infra*, chapter 3, § Induction and Hyperspecialization.
- 35 “Hey, cutie. I don’t even know your real name, but it’s a leap year. Marry me. [Catwoman kisses Batman]. No. It’s okay. I get it. You are married to the city. You’re going to stop the bad people doing bad things if it kills you” (Gaiman 2009).
- 36 In recent times, this emasculation of the character has become an editorial imperative. The first edition of *Batman: Damned #1* (September 2018) showed for the first time a naked and weakened Bruce Wayne in which the silhouette of his genitals could be distinguished. At the request of the publishers, the second American edition and all international editions would dispense with the allusion. The example would not be particularly surprising were it not for the fact that the arc inaugurated a new DC imprint named “DC Black Label” explicitly created for the adult reader.
- 37 About Dostoevsky’s Gothic, Georg Steiner says: “In Dostoevsky’s novels we cannot separate ‘the tragic’ from ‘the fantastic.’ Indeed, the tragic ritual is presented and lifted above the current flatness of experience by means of the fantastic” (Steiner 1960, 211).
- 38 “It was a freak of fancy in my friend (for what else shall I call it?) to be enamored of the Night for her own sake; and into this bizarrerie, as into all his others, I quietly fell; giving myself up to his wild whims with a perfect abandon” (Poe 1990, *The Crimes of the Rue Morgue*, 179).
- 39 See e.g., Goodwin 1974; also Conway 1982.
- 40 *Batman Dracula* (dir. Andy Warhol, 1964). A 35-minute film only screened at the artist’s exhibitions. The material was thought to be lost until its inclusion in the documentary *Jack Smith and the Destruction of Atlantis* (2006). In 2005, Warner Bros. would release the animated film *Batman vs. Dracula*.

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