September 2015

Revision in the Multiversity: What Composition Can Learn from the Superhero

David Hyman
CUNY Lehman College, david.hyman@lehman.cuny.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sane

Part of the American Literature Commons, American Popular Culture Commons, Art Education Commons, Comparative Literature Commons, Creative Writing Commons, Curriculum and Instruction Commons, Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons, Educational Methods Commons, Educational Psychology Commons, English Language and Literature Commons, Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons, Higher Education Commons, Illustration Commons, Interdisciplinary Arts and Media Commons, Rhetoric and Composition Commons, and the Visual Studies Commons

We live in an era in which revision has emerged as a central strategy of contemporary superhero narratives. As I write these words, both of the major corporate overseers of superhero comics are in the midst of two more continuity-altering "events", *Convergence* and *Secret Wars*, in what has become a formulaic mode of composition by which the intertextual secondary worlds of Marvel and DC attempt to sustain themselves and their readers' attention. This ubiquity of revision is unique neither to the superhero nor to this historical moment; indeed, the generation of different versions of characters and their narrative cosmos is characteristic of several enduring fictional worlds, from those of Orestes and Odysseus to Sherlock Holmes and James Bond. Nevertheless, the distinctive convergence of economic and aesthetic conditions that has characterized the production and consumption of superhero texts for much of their history has contributed to a compositional environment in which constant and ongoing revision is one of the genre's most characteristic qualities: "Whether the superhero finds its roots in ancient mythologies or takes shape as the quintessential commodity of the 21st century's world marketplace, it must be acknowledged that as long as the superhero has been in existence, it has been 'in the making,' working through a series of revisions" (Wandtke 5).

The omnipresence of revision throughout the history of the superhero genre has perhaps obfuscated deeper inquiries into the precise nature of the different practices and processes that the term can be used to describe, and the ways in which these practices have shifted and developed over time. Of particular importance is the increasing tendency of several distinct revised continuities to co-exist, so much so that Henry Jenkins posits this trend as the defining characteristic of the most recent organizational system of narrative production within the superhero genre, a paradigm shift within contemporary superhero fiction from *continuity* to *multiplicity*:

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

While the paradigm of continuity involves a never-ending battle to render textual inconsistencies, alternatives, and recursions into a coherent whole, multiplicity is characterized by the coexistence of several divergent, and often contradictory, continuities: " Under this system, readers may consume multiple versions of the same franchise, each with different conceptions of the character, different understandings of their relationships with the secondary figures, different moral perspectives, exploring different moments in their lives, and so forth" (20).

Prior to the advent of the generic pattern that Jenkins signifies by the term *multiplicity*, the superhero genre's framing of the revision process had been guided by a deeply rooted belief that the purpose of revising is the elimination of textual discontinuities, resulting in a consistent and coherent final product. This predilection is shared by the underlying premises of revision in other scholarly disciplines, from textual editing's historical goal of delineating and ultimately disposing of corruptions and impurities, to composition studies' situating of revision as a culminating stage in the production of a final draft. This sense of revision as the practice of establishing and maintaining continuity is so basic that one is tempted to see it as a part of revision's pre-ontology: a *sine qua non* so fundamental as to be beyond question. However, several relatively recent superhero narratives have taken advantage of the narrative freedom from

established continuity by taking a different approach to revision, one that acknowledges the discontinuities of the superhero's textual past rather than seeking to abscond and erase them. This revaluation involves a transformation of the conception of revision in which it is viewed not as the practice of developing a singular definitive text, but rather as the articulation of the relationship between multiple textual versions.

This paper explores the parallels between this transformation and the struggles within contemporary composition studies to reestablish the relevance of textual practices in the wake of the sea changes within the discipline frequently characterized as the *social turn*. The nexus of this conversation is a mutual concern with the idea of *revision* as the practice of negotiating disruptions of continuity. Nancy Welch writes in 1997 that:

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

While scholars such as Cheryl Ball are currently doing provocative research on revision of multimodal texts, the fact remains that the applications and implications of revision as composing strategy remain largely hidden from mainstream disciplinary attention. When the word is still utilized, revision is frequently used to signify shifts in consciousness regarding social and institutional dynamics, and the new and revised outlooks resulting from such shifts:

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

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

> As composition takes "the social turn," Trimbur writes, teachers and researchers no longer locate their interests and questions in "students' reading and writing processes," but instead in "the cultural politics of literacy"(p.109). With this shift, revision, understood as a late stage in a generic writing process, gets left behind, outdated as words like *prewriting* and *planning*. Any mention of such words, I'm guessing, might signal what Trimbur calls "an unwillingness to break" with 1970s process pedagogies (p.112). Ironically, however, what seems to happen in the social turn is this: Even as post-process theorists charge process pedagogy with ignoring context, erasing social differences and social forces, their own research similarly effaces specific writers and scenes of writing. (24)

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

Several superhero narratives composed in the aftermath of Jenkins' paradigm shift towards multiplicity reveal that constant and ongoing revision is the compositional tactic through

which new texts negotiate the powerful struggle between reiteration of the genre's past, and creative expression of its future. These narratives, by making explicit the superhero genre's negotiations with continuity and multiplicity, provide provocative conceptual frameworks for new directions through which to reinvigorate study of the practice of revision within composition studies. Instead of a gradual succession of improved renditions of a text, each one effacing and superseding the imperfections of its predecessors, revision is revealed as the production of multiple versions whose differences and diversities are "capable of being in uncertainties", as Keats describes the creative attitude which he terms Negative Capability: ontologically equal textual variations that wear their inconsistencies openly, and reject the pressure to resolve their multiplicities into the synthetic continuity of a polished final text. In the following pages, two of these narratives will be explored as offering new frames and metaphors that can assist in re-imagining the practice of revision within the writing classroom: *Planetary*; and *Supreme: The Story of the Year*.

Planetary: Revision as Resistance

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

> The heroes…are neither crime-fighters nor global guardians, but, by some perfect stroke of inspiration, archaeologists. People digging down beneath the surface of the world to learn its past, its secrets and its marvels. In this instance, though, the

world that's under excavation is not our immediate sphere, despite the fact that it's almost as familiar. Instead, we dig into a planet that is nothing less than the accumulated landscape of almost a hundred years of fantasy, of comic books. (*All Over The World* ii)

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

The diegetic transformation of the Fantastic Four into villains highlights the moral ambiguity present in muted form in the original Marvel characters' earliest versions. Story elements present in the early source texts, such as the ambivalence of the Thing towards using his powers for good and the narrative conflation of science, anticommunism, and justice, are reinterpreted in *Planetary*'s retelling as explicit manifestations of American hegemony and arrogance. Viewed as revision, therefore, the Four's new status as villains reflects a shift in the assessment of, rather than a radical alteration of, basic established elements of the characters'

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

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

Both the Four's attempts to suppress and control all manifestations of the extraordinary other than themselves, as well as Planetary's attempts to preserve and restore the marginalized genre forms of the past that have been lost and forgotten with the ascendancy of the Silver Age paradigm, can be seen as acts of revision. The Four practice revision as the dismissal of all alternatives to their own textual hegemony; the diegetic reasoning behind this is the Four's desire

to prevent the development of any potential threats to the Four's status as ultimate world power. However, it applies equally to the process by which a single text attempts to assert precedence over all other texts: to become the definitive source of the *fabula*. This is revision as the imposition of power over the already-written; following the advice of David Bartholomae, it begins by being dismissive:

> I begin by not granting the writer her "own" presence in that paper, by denying the paper's status as a record of or a route to her own thoughts and feelings. I begin instead by asking her to read her paper as a text already written by the culture, representing a certain predictable version of the family, the daughter, and the writer. I ask her to look at who speaks in the essay and who doesn't. I ask her to look at the organization of the essay to see what it excludes. And I ask her to revise in such a way that the order of the essay is broken-to write against the grain of the discourse that has determined her account of her family. (85)

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

Thus, memory, particularly as manifest by the reader's recollection of superseded textual versions, in *Planetary* is an act of resistance. The Four represent the drive towards primacy of

smooth narrative continuity. The cost, the loss of textual realities that accompanied the triumph of the Silver Age paradigm represented by The Four, is the price of privileging *fabula* over *syuzhet*: the triumph of story continuity over textual reality. For the recursive eradication of predecessors renders their ontological status "merely" textual; the "real" story is supertextual, or, at least, only capable of expression in an *ultimate* text.

Except for the fact that we remember them. No amount of recursive revision of the story can completely erase reader recollections of superseded textual realities. The hegemony of the Four, and of the narrative approach that they embody, is thus opposed by memory. That memory should be at the thematic crux of contemporary superhero fiction is not without irony, given the ephemeral presuppositions which until recently governed both the production and consumption of most superhero narratives. Ongoing serial publication has created a situation in which prior versions cannot be erased as easily as the draft materials of traditional texts. There is no delete button to push; no crumpled pages to toss in the waste basket. Writing over the past has not resulted in a palimpsest whose bottom layers need to be carefully restored with infrared equipment. The old text is as bright as the primary colors in which it was printed: if not in mylar-sealed collectibles or archival reprint volumes, then in the memories of those readers whose passionate responses are a main reason for the continued production of new versions of the superhero.

Planetary incorporates this tension at a later point in its storyline, when the reader discovers that the Four have placed memory blocks on Elijah Snow. The result is not total amnesia, but selective retention of the past, as Randall Dowling, leader of the Four explains to the captured Snow:

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

The danger that Snow poses is that his memories are unfiltered by the recursive alterations of the most up-to-date texts. His recollections are the last remnants of the narrative trends that were either transformed by or left out of the Four's revised universe. The multiple and divergent narrative possibilities residing in the superhero genre's own narrative history, Elijah Snow's unblocked memories, challenge the domination of this tendency towards finality and consistency. Snow thus represents an alternative paradigm for dealing with revision when faced with discontinuity; rather than viewing irreconcilable texts as problems to be resolved, they are for him ineluctable realities that must be preserved.

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

The struggle between Planetary and the Four emphasizes the power of revision as a means of resisting hegemonic forms. The Four are driven to obscure or erase evidence of paradigms that preceded their status as dominant generic narrative, and to destroy or subjugate

new manifestations of the fantastic as they arise, precisely because they perceive these alternatives as threats to their position as the definers of generic parameters. To borrow Raymond Williams' famous categories of cultural transition, the Four represent the struggle of the dominant to incorporate those aspects of residual and emergent forms that remain somewhat independent, and thus capable of generating alternative or oppositional paradigms (Williams 121-127). This is because such traces are among the most potent sources for generating new texts that challenge the hegemony of normative standards. Seen in this light, Bartholomae's strategy of a revision that begins by being dismissive of the text is not an act of resistance to the complex forces that write through us; rather, the subjugation of the version to the devaluing critical gaze is presumptuous, and removes the text from the historical continuum within which it may prove to be the source of unpredictable alternative, or even oppositional, compositions. Instead, the Planetary team's practice of unearthing and archiving the hidden past and alternative present of the superhero genre emphasizes the revolutionary aspect of Donald Murray's idea of revision as *discovery*: "Revision— the process of seeing what you've said to discover what you have to say— is the motivating force within most writers. They are compelled to write to see what their words tell them" (56). The ability to see what has been said can only occur when the textual evidence remains available. In a world where the dismissal and marginalization of non-hegemonic views is the primary mode of domination, resistance is most successfully practiced through the uncritical preservation of alternatives.

The *Planetary* paradigm embraces the odd contradictions intrinsic to the genre's distinct narrative structure and history, to a tradition that has seen its implied reader transform from early adolescence to adulthood, and its historical context from the Manichean clarity of the Second World War to the ambivalence and ambiguity of millennial late capitalism. The official,

sanctioned continuity of the moment no longer serves as the Procrustean bed that cuts away

unwanted textual history; rather, it becomes co-extensive with the texts that produce it. *Planetary*

calls this new paradigm the *Snowflake*:

> The Snowflake rotates. Each element of the Snowflake rotates. Each rotation
>
> describes an entirely new universe. The total number of rotations are equal to the
>
> number of atoms making up the earth. Each rotation makes a new earth. This is
>
> the multiverse. (*All Over The World* 17)

This is the shape of the superhero narrative at this stage of its evolution. Its history is dense

enough that it has become a tradition; its creators now work with an awareness of narrative

paradoxes and their stories have become increasingly self-referential regarding the textual past of

the genre. The choice currently before the medium is between the two approaches: linear

continuity versus the Snowflake; the universe versus the multiverse; an updated version of the

past versus a genuine exploration of influences both hidden and obvious; the Four versus Snow

and the Planetary team. As another famous advocate of textual infinitude writes: "The concept of

the "definitive text" corresponds only to religion or exhaustion."(Borges 69)

Supreme: Homodoxy versus Orthodoxy

One of the hallmarks of continuity is that it provides a model of assessment based on

correctness, at least inasmuch as this can be measured by internal narrative consistency.

Measured according to the guidelines of continuity, the goal of revision is therefore the

attainment and preservation of cohesion. As has been discussed earlier, however, one of the

hallmarks of multiplicity inevitably weakens the need to impose this as a standard for revision.

Instead of a single, overarching continuity, several divergent, and often contradictory,

continuities co-exist. This liberates new texts from the impossible goal of consolidating all the disparate textual data that has accumulated around specific characters, instead allowing for multiple versions each with their own provisional and delimited continuities; there is thus no longer any demand to have all narrative versions of a character conform to each other as part of the "same" fictional world.

Despite this transformation, the notion of correctness as standard still applies, in some ways stronger than ever. While multiple continuities currently co-exist and cannot resolve into one comprehensive set of consistent versions and interpretations, each considered separately is more beholding to narrative cohesion than ever. Removed from the impossible conditions of continuity, errors can no longer be excused as the inevitable outcome of a unique generic tradition; since each new version can in effect construct its own rules unencumbered by the influence of prior versions, each can be judged according to the degree to which it is internally consistent.

However, the advantages of composing narratives under the conditions of multiplicity have frequently come at the cost of rejecting the distinctive generic quality of the superhero: the ineluctable presence of intertextual discontinuity. While *Planetary* incorporates textual acknowledgement of discontinuity, it does so through constructing narrative explanations that function as metatextual commentaries on revision; the Planetary team's resistance to the Four involves the archival restoration of the lipstick traces of the secret history of the genre so that future revisions can derive inspiration from the vast reservoir of dormant residual generic materials by framing revision in terms of memory and forgetting. Alan Moore's *Supreme: The Story of the Year* continues this trend. However, while *Planetary* explores the dynamics of discontinuity, it ultimately frames it in terms of conflict and resolution, or what Ellis calls *magic*

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

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

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

The story begins with Supreme, suffering from loss of memory, returning to earth after the conclusion of the final storyline preceding Moore's assumption of creative control. His confusion increases dramatically upon encountering three alternative versions of himself: Sister Supreme, a black female version; Superion, a futuristic descendant; and Squeak the Supremouse, an anthropomorphic animal variant. Each of these variations on the Supreme theme represent

different moments in the textual history of the superhero: attempts to redress the overwhelming generic bias towards white male representations through the introduction of women and minority characters that began in the early 1970s; heroes of future variant continuities commonly postulated in the imaginary stories that Eco described; and products of the mixing of the superhero and funny animal genres such as Mighty Mouse. These versions inform "our" Supreme that a revision is about to take place, and lead him to the sanctuary of the Supremacy, a limbo dimension where earlier superseded and parallel versions of the characters who have at one time or many populated the Supreme continuity exist after being replaced by newer revisions:

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

The discarded Supremes are themselves constructs of Moore's revision, and do not predate his composition of *The Story of the Year*. The textual history of Supreme extends back only to 1992; thus, the allusions that Moore incorporates into the story are not based on an actual textual past, but are part of his conscious attempt to compose on both the episodic and the serial levels of the superhero's characteristic double inscription simultaneously. By drawing upon the textual diversity of the genre's past as source material, Moore creates a parallel intertextual continuity that treats Supreme as if the character's history were isomorphic to that of the "real" fictional history of the character to which Supreme stands as analogue, imitation, and *homage*: Superman. The revised reality that Supreme explores once he leaves the Supremacy incorporates a vast number of slightly-altered elements from diverse periods within the Superman tradition:

the Citadel Supreme, a variation on Superman's Fortress of Solitude; the Prism-World of Amalynth, analogue of the bottled and shrunken city of Kandor; the League of Infinity, the Supreme universe's version of the Legion of Superheroes; as well as several "remembered" experiences of encounters with arch-nemesis Darius Dax, a Lex Luthor to Supreme's Superman. Each experience of the new reality is supplemented by the filling-in of memories of earlier versions based on sixty years of superhero texts, each drawn in styles representative of the era they are meant to evoke.

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

One can readily imagine a revised version of this vestigial aspect of the intertext that emphasizes nostalgia for a lost past, or else uses the robots to critique older generic presuppositions regarding sentience and agency. Instead, Moore juxtaposes a "remembered" sequence, in which the robots, who repeatedly address him as *master*, help him conceal his identity from his entourage of recurrent friends, with a "current" one in which S-1, "the only one capable of independent thought" (81), rebels against Supreme by trying to take his place. The effect of this juxtaposition is not that of the counter-narrative, whereby we see the logical

implications of the naivety of the earlier treatment of the theme; nor is it one of rupture, which emphasizes the incompatibility of the two versions. The earlier depiction of Supreme's relationship with the Suprematons is not demeaned and discredited as much as it is supplemented by the new encounter. Supreme goes on to reprogram S-1, who, along with the rest of the Suprematons, continue to play secondary roles in *The Story of the Year*. However, the deeper themes of identity and consciousness that Moore has added are not abandoned; eventually, S-1 asserts his independence by assuming a new name, Talos, and leaving Supreme to start a new life for himself.

Instead of ignoring or explaining away differences between versions, Moore has created an interplay among multiplicities in which discontinuities are highlighted and celebrated. This inclusive strategy establishes a criterion for textual unity based less on the logical consistency of character and plot than on the resonance between even the most divergent discrepancies. Moore's description of his work on *The Story of the Year* is relevant to this approach:

> To some degree, Supreme is an archetypal big-guy superhero in a cape, who stands up as well as all the others. To some degree, that's what I wanted to do with all the characters. I want to make them archetypal. I want to give them that archetypal power that the best superheroes have… (5)

Moore's use of the term *archetypal* prompts a reconsideration of the relationship between the superhero and the mythic. The conventional reading of the connection between the superhero and mythology focuses on the analogous relationship between iconic characters such as Superman with mythic predecessors such as Heracles and Samson. Umberto Eco has already offered a *détournement* of this interpretive approach by focusing on the mythic as a narrative

mode that contributes to the superhero chronotope, rather than as repository of characters and exploits of which the superhero represents an updated version:

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

The mythic is thus characterized by the determinate nature of its story material, by the definitive fact that the stories being recounted have already been established: "….Hercules would be seen as someone who has a story, and this story would characterize his divine features. The story has taken place and can no longer be denied" (108).

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

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

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

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

Thus, correctness is not measured by approximating the "right" version of a story or character. Instead, versions are acceptable according to whether or not they resonate closely enough to be perceived as cognates. Inconsistencies between versions of stories, such as Zeus' birthplace, or the name of Oedipus' mother/wife, were not perceived as problematic. This is a decidedly less literal and fundamentalist approach than that of orthodoxy. The notion of orthodoxy itself becomes problematic, a vestigial remnant of an inoperative approach to textuality.

The lack of orthodoxy as standard of evaluation does not grant equality to all versions; in *The Story of the Year*, there is an implicit privileging of two Supremes: the "current" Supreme, as the most recent avatar of revision; and the silver age Supreme, ruler of the Supremacy. However, this evaluative hierarchy must be contrasted with the rigidity involved in the declaration of one version as orthodox. In the first case, the criterion of elevation is the narrative function of the new Supreme as focaliser of the story; the reader sees the multiplicity of the superhero through his incarnation as most recent version. In the second case, the status is an acknowledgement of the collective reader response to the silver age version of Superman as the dominant, default

"norm" of the character. However, Moore presents this not as a threat to the creative expressivity of new versions, but rather as a major, yet not exclusive, source of their inspiration. The result is a challenge to orthodoxy that celebrates the imaginative joy of the earlier superhero texts without ignoring the realities of the present, both within and without the genre:

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

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

Superhero narratives such as *The Story of the Year* and *Planetary* provide glimpses of approaches to revision that are both critical of traditional models as well as deeply rooted in the production of texts; thus, they serve as a potential bridge between the often-increasing distance separating theoretical critique and practical advice so common in contemporary composition studies. In this respect the composers of superhero fiction parallel the teacher of writing, so often situated amidst competing visions of composition as skill, as self-discovery, as ticket to entry into academic discourse, as institutional necessity. Like the unfolding tale of composition studies, the diachronic tradition of the superhero both shapes and is shaped by the struggle between competing, often contradictory demands of consistency and discontinuity, as well as of

the marketplace and creative expression. By grappling more creatively with the paradoxes of revision, perhaps composition can begin the process of reinvigorating and redefining the roles that revision can and will play in the future of the teaching and study of writing. To borrow the title of Grant Morrison's recent contribution to this generic trend, such an approach can be viewed as an opening move in developing composition pedagogies suitable for the *multiversity* rather than the *university*.

Works Cited

Ball, Cheryl E. "Multimodal Revision Techniques in Webtexts." <u>Classroom Discourse</u> 5.1 (2014): 91-105.

Bartholomae, David and Peter Elbow. "Responses to Bartholomae and Elbow." <u>College Composition and Communication</u> 46.1 (1995): 84-92.

Borges, Jorge Luis. "The Homeric Versions." Borges, Jorge Luis. <u>Selected Non-Fictions</u>. Ed. Eliot Weinberger. Trans. Esther Allen et al. New York: Penguin Books, 1999. 69-74.

Eco, Umberto. "The Myth of Superman." Eco, Umberto. <u>The Role of the Reader.</u> Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979. 107-124.

Ellis, Warren. <u>Planetary: All Over the World and Other Stories.</u> La Jolla: Wildstorm Productions, 2000.

—. <u>Planetary: The Fourth Man.</u> La Jolla: Wildstorm Productions, 2001.

—. <u>The Planetary Reader.</u> La Jolla: Wildstorm Productions, 2003.

Fox, Robin Lane. <u>Pagans and Christians.</u> New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987.

Harris, Joseph. "Revision as a Critical Practice." <u>College English</u> 65.6 (2003): 577-592.

Jenkins, Henry. "'Just Men in Tights': Rewriting Silver Age Comics in the Age of Multiplicity." <u>The Contemporary Comic Book Superhero.</u> Ed. Angela Ndalianis. New York: Routledge, 2009. 16-43.

Keats, John. "To George and Tom Keats." Keats, John. <u>Selected Letters.</u> Ed. Robert Gittings. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. 40-42.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. "The Structural Study of Myth." Lévi-Strauss, Claude. <u>Structural Anthropology.</u> Trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf. New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1963. 206-231.

Moore, Alan. <u>Supreme: The Story of the Year.</u> Centerville: Checker Book Publishing Group, 2002.

Murray, Donald. "Teach the Motivating Force of Revision." <u>The English Journal</u> (1978): 56-60.

Trimbur, John. "Taking the Social Turn: Teaching Writing Post-Process." <u>College Composition and Communication</u> (1994): 108-118.

Wandtke, Terrence R. "Introduction." <u>The Amazing Transforming Superhero!</u> Ed. Terrence R. Wandtke. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2007. 5-32.

Welch, Nancy. <u>Getting Restless: Rethinking Revision in Writing Instruction.</u> Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 1997.

Williams, Raymond. <u>Marxism and Literature.</u> Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.