Chapter Nine

The Dark Knight of the Soul

Death as Initiatory Ordeal in Grant Morrison's Batman R.I.P.

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In the opening scenes of the Christopher Nolan blockbuster *Batman Begins* (2005, and now arguably the canonical version of Batman's origin story for the general public), Bruce Wayne acquires his martial arts skills from Illuminati ninjas in the Himalayas.[1] Narratively, the most famous ancestor of this scene is the celebrated 1989 comic *The Man Who Falls,* which set Batman's training in a mountain monastery in Korea.[2] On a visual, and perhaps on a conceptual level as well, the imagery suggests the fictional city of Nanda Parbat, the closest analogue in the DC Comics universe to the Shangri-La of Tibetophile New Age lore. This idea, in turn draws on the mythology of the most prominent Victorian occult organizations, the Theosophical Society and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, whose leaders claimed contact with an invisible college of Hidden Masters or Secret Chiefs. These allegedly occluded adepts—it was claimed as often as not—guided human evolution from an undisclosed location high in the mountains of Tibet.[3] Alas, as anyone who has seen the Nolan film knows, the League of Shadows (a.k.a. League of Assassins) are more anarchist guerrillas than benevolent mystics. Grant Morrison adopts and exploits these tropes in and around his *Batman R.I.P*. story arc, which hinges on the idea that the Caped Crusader has learned Buddhist meditative techniques for navigating death and rebirth from red-robed monks in Nanda Parbat (who then attempt to poison him). While Morrison dodges the most obvious clichés of romantic Orientalism, his presentation of Tibetan Buddhism comes filtered through Victorian occultism nonetheless: the visionary practices he depicts as a high-level initiation in-

duce an experience of ego death analogous to an existential crisis, or what Catholic theologians have famously termed the Dark Night of the Soul.[4]

REBIRTH OF THE BATMAN

The majority of Morrison's refashioning of the Batman story takes place in his 2008 run of *Batman*.[5] Morrison, a superstar comic book writer known for his eccentric metafictional approach, has said that his personal goal for *Batman* was to try to resolve the diverse forms Batman has taken since his introduction in 1939—from grim vigilante and pulp detective to gay camp, and especially the more obscure and outlandish sci-fi variants—into a single character.[6] In attempting to do so, Morrison's solution involved a further fracturing of his protagonist's personality beyond the primal dyad Bruce Wayne/Batman. The current incarnation of the "Caped Crusader," it is revealed, is but one of several secret identities, with others of which even Batman himself is not consciously aware. This fragmentation of the self, which under normal circumstances might be termed dissociative identity disorder, is in Morrison's postmodernist rendering precisely what enables Bruce Wayne to survive the death of his parents and ultimately his own death as well.

The "death" in question here means ego death: the destruction of the Bruce Wayne personality and thus of Batman as we know him. Space constraints prohibit detailing too precisely the various strands of this cosmically convoluted psychodrama, but in brief, a supervillain named Dr. Hurt, who claims to be Bruce Wayne's father (but may be the literal Devil), attempts to eliminate Batman by means of malicious post-hypnotic suggestions planted years earlier during sensory deprivation experiments. Rather, I will focus here on how Batman, using Tibetan yogic practices with sensory deprivation elements of their own, discovers this "mind bomb" and creates a "backup personality" in anticipation of the attack. As a plot point, this is crucial, since it is the backup Batman, unencumbered by Bruce Wayne and common-sense rationality, who eventually emerges victorious, but it is also apparent that Morrison folds other Buddhist elements into the larger conceptual thrust of the story.

For the purposes under consideration, the Buddhist Batman story line begins when the title character is shot at the end of issue #672 and his heart stops. The next five issues consist mainly of flashbacks, and the implication is that these are so-called post-mortem brain activity: "brain death occurs five minutes after cardiac arrest," his shooter explains, adding, "a lot can happen in five minutes."[7] The shooter resuscitates Batman after four minutes in order to torture him (and of course Batman escapes), but the flashbacks begin to fill in the details of an even more insidious plot to destroy Batman, and

how he anticipated it. After Batman's heart stops, we move almost immediately to Bruce Wayne performing *thoïgal,* a practice Morrison glosses as "one of the most advanced and dangerous forms of meditation" (see Fig. 9.1). Still more specifically, as Wayne is shown being closed into (or perhaps released from) a dark cave in the fictional Himalayan temple town of Nanda Parbat about a year earlier, the author describes "a seven week retreat known as Yangti," during which "the practitioner undergoes an experience designed to simulate death and after-death. And rebirth too." In his journal of this "silent isolation" ritual, Bruce Wayne notes that "Hearing voices is normal. Hallucinations from the past and present are normal. Flashing lights and intimations of mortality are normal." Beyond this, his retreat does not follow a traditional script.

Morrison punctuates the hallucinatory events that follow with cave-centric updates ("13th day of Thöigal," "23th day of Thöigal," etc.) that reassert Batman's meditative experience as the narrative frame for three other death and rebirth sequences crucial to the story, beginning with the title character's famous origin when a child reeling from his parents' murder emerges from a swarm of bats having conquered his fear. Still more important, at least for our purposes here, are flashbacks to a ten-day sensory deprivation experiment in a lab, which the ever-rational Batman had participated in order to better understand "psychotic states" and anticipate "how the Joker's mind worked."[8] In the course of reliving these experiences Bruce Wayne discovers

Figure 9.1. Bruce Wayne in dark retreat. ***Image from* Batman *#673 (Mar. 2008). Used with permission of DC Comics. Batman #673 © DC Comics.***

that the researcher running the isolation tank (Dr. Hurt) had engineered an hallucination that Batman was responsible for the death of Robin and buried deep in his mind along with the trauma a subliminal command: "I must put away my batman costume and retire from crimefighting."[9] At some point in the future, a keyword would activate this psychologically crippling experience of self-doubt and effectively eliminate Batman. Readers see the first glimpses of this during Batman's four minutes of clinical death, but it is revealed that Batman uncovered the plot earlier, during his *thögal* meditation, and put a plan in place.

Readers may choose whether to credit Batman's preview of his own death(s) to meditative clairvoyance, a time-travel paradox, or the illogic of hidden implanted memories, but Batman's visions in the cave seem to include content that has not yet taken place chronologically. On the first day of his *yangti* retreat he notes, "I'm having a heart attack. Some kind of flash forward. Déjà vu."[10] Now in theory Bruce Wayne is only human, so completely cheating physical death was never really on the table.[11] But physical death, however inevitable, was never the endgame for the diabolical syndicate behind the plot. The Black Glove—"a group of mega-wealthy international gamblers"[12]—explicitly do not want Batman dead, preferring to savor the "annihilation of a proud spirit." They want to see him publicly disgraced, "permanently brain damaged," corrupted, and disfigured "to look like his worst enemy" the Joker.[13] They want to destroy the idea of Batman. So they switched off the Batman aspect of Wayne's personality using the post-hypnotic suggestion in preparation for an elaborate set piece at the Arkham Asylum for the Criminally Insane that would definitively "ruin him body and soul."[14]

They might have gotten away with it too, except that Batman created a backup personality for just the occasion. The keyword, "Zur-en-arrh," still triggered a nervous breakdown when Bruce Wayne heard it, and with it the loss of both the Batman and the Bruce Wayne identities (there never was a difference), but after a few drug-addled days wandering the streets of Gotham with the ghost of a homeless man as his psychopomp, another Batman personality surfaces. No longer a technologically enhanced Dark Knight of stealth and deduction, this maniacal, baseball-bat-wielding berzerker clad in Superman or perhaps Robin-esque bright red was appropriately dubbed the Batman of Zur-en-arrh.[15] Ironically, the attempt to eliminate Batman produced an insane Batman untempered by the Bruce Wayne personality. The closest thing to a voice of reason he heeds manifests separately (and only to him) as a reality-warping Bat-imp.[16] To make the point clearer, when the Batman of Zur-en-arrh prepares to enter Arkham Asylum in the story's final act, this floating fifth-dimensional delusion cum companion hangs back, warning that "reason won't fit through this door. You have to face it alone."

In his inevitable confrontation with the Joker, who welcomes Batman to the place "where your soul dies," this theme of rationality takes center stage. Explaining his apparent victory, the Joker reflects on his relationship with the Dark Knight in symbolic terms; as a primal dualism, "a yin/yang thing" with Batman, the detective, embodying—and therefore constrained by—rational thought where the "Clown Prince of Crime" is free: "the real joke is your stubborn, bone deep conviction that somehow, somewhere, all of this makes sense!" Chiding Batman for his faith in "symbolism and structures and hints and clues," he urges Batman to "let go . . . it's so simple . . . life . . . death . . . it's all a big joke."[17] The Batman of Zur-en-arrh, for his part, runs heedless into the lethal trap and is quickly incapacitated before being buried alive in a coffin, eliciting more detailed flashbacks to *thoïgal* and its aftermath in Nanda Parbat.

Here we see Bruce Wayne in a temple painted with the wrathful, fire-wreathed deities of Buddhist tantric pantheon. He sips tea with a red-robed monk while debriefing from his retreat in the cave. Bruce describes "vivid hallucinations of the past and present, even the future" as we already know. "But then I came to the end of even that. I found myself in a place that's not a place." Bruce goes on to explain how he then found a "scar . . . as if something had been hidden" in his mind and began to develop an "emergency personality as a defense" against psychological attack. There is more to be said about this conversation, but in terms of the main narrative this is of course when he discovers the kill-switch for the Batman identity and (it is strongly implied) when he generates the Batman of Zur-en-arrh as a "back-up human operating system." Placed at this point in the narrative, his experience of *thoïgal* is also, apparently, crucial to the eventual reintegration of the Batman and Bruce Wayne identities in the coffin outside Arkham Asylum. On one page, Wayne explains that he "chose to endure thoïgal . . . to taste the flavor of death . . . In the cave, in Nanda Parbat, I hunted down and killed and ate the last traces of fear and doubt in my mind."[18] And on the next page Batman—the real Batman—bursts from his grave, his triumph a fait accompli.

TANTRA AND THOÏGAL IN THE NANDA PARBAT TRADITION

Morrison, it must be acknowledged, is not a Tibetologist, and there will certainly be some points in which events in the fictionalized Himalayan setting will diverge from traditional Buddhist norms. Morrison does explicitly identify *thoïgal* with "the Dzogchen tradition of Tibetan Buddhism,"[19] but the stated location, Nanda Parbat, is intentionally ambiguous. The Sanskritic name suggests perhaps Nepal but the single local character has a Chinese name (Master Lo) and the temple interior rendered by Tony Daniel boasts a

curiously Japanese aesthetic.[20] Terminologically, in any case, Morrison is quite precise: Tibetan Buddhist traditions are our obvious starting points.

Readers familiar with Buddhism will know already that the Mahāyāna ("Great Vehicle") form of Buddhism prevalent in the Tibetan cultural area and in East Asia views the more "conservative" Theravada ("Tradition of the Elders") variant dominant in Sri Lanka and South East Asia as a lower teaching. In the rhetoric of Mahāyāna texts, the "Smaller Vehicle" (of which Theravada is taken as an exemplar) is legitimate as far as it goes, but it was designed for people whose limited capacities prevented them from accepting the more expansive philosophical and supererogatory ethical view of the Great Vehicle. Both schools, of course, developed in India, and likewise when Tantric Buddhism came on the scene, its proponents espoused a similar brand of triumphalism. While largely operating in a Mahāyāna context, they laid claim to a new, esoteric revelation for an even more elite caliber of practitioner. In time some Buddhist Tantric practitioners began to refer to their form of Mahāyāna Buddhist practice as a third Vehicle: the Vajrayāna.

It was Vajrayāna Buddhism that spread from India to Tibet when translators began rendering Buddhist scriptures from Sanskrit into Tibetan in the eighth century, and when a new translation project commenced in the eleventh century to revise and expand the corpus of Buddhist scriptures, Tibet's first major sectarian rift emerged. As the textual authentication standards and lineages of the so-called Tibetan Renaissance took hold among a majority of Tibetans, those who clung to the deuterocanonical Tantric literature produced during the earlier translation period dubbed themselves the Nyingma or "Old School" (*rnying ma*). Among the most distinctive Nyingma doctrines is a roughly sequential arrangement of nine vehicles with teachings known as the Great Perfection or Dzogchen (*rdzogs chen*) at the zenith. Following well-established Indic precedents, Dzogchen authors advance supercessionist rhetoric of their own regarding the "lower" (i.e., Mahāyoga and Anuyoga Tantric) vehicles, positioning Dzogchen as both the higher perspective on the practices that correspond roughly to the New Schools' characteristic two-stage presentation of the Vajrayāna and as a discrete practice above it.[21]

This would mean that for Bruce Wayne to learn practices from the most advanced strata of Nyingma teachings he would need, theoretically, to have progressed through at least six of the previous vehicles according to their scheme. Minimally, this would include formally becoming a Buddhist and vowing to liberate all beings from cyclic rebirth; training in exoteric Buddhist philosophy, morality, and meditation; and performing extensive preparatory rituals (*sngon 'gro*) before even obtaining lower-level tantric initiations. I will discuss later how Morrison uses *the language* of initiation, but as far as I have seen, he neither depicts or directly implies that any of that is the case, with the possible exception of meditation.[22] Having presumably undergone the graded sequence of initiations Bruce Wayne would practice ritual-

ized deity yoga,[23] training to transform into a Tantric god using visualization and yogic psychophysiology, before gaining access to the Dzogchen teachings.[24] There is more to be said on the matters of motivation and Tantric transformation with reference to his "back-up personality," but it will suffice to say that the Dzogchen material Bruce Wayne apparently knows would normally become available only after years of dedicated Buddhist practice of which we have scant textual evidence. Batman's expertise at just about everything is, after all, one of the central conceits of the character. Let us assume, then, that Batman is sufficiently trained in Vajrayāna Buddhism to qualify for Dzogchen teachings.

The Nyingma tradition considers Dzogchen distinct from and superior to all other forms of Tantra in that it purports to lead trainees directly to an experience of the primordially pure ultimate reality: luminous awareness as the true nature of the mind itself, without recourse (at the final stages) to any conceptualization. Relative to standard Tantric methods, where liberation requires mentally generating a prototype deity and meditatively dissolving one's identity into this mind-made body through elaborate rituals and visualizations, Dzogchen emphasizes techniques for uncovering the undifferentiated substrata of all experience, allowing enlightened awareness to shine through effortlessly in the present moment. The luminescent imagery is more than metaphorical in the context of Dzogchen, as will be seen. Another unique feature of the tradition is the claim that the actual physical bodies of the best practitioners evaporate into multicolored "rainbow" light when they achieve the summum bonum, leaving only their hair and nails behind.[25] Whether Bruce Wayne particularly aspires to achieve the so-called rainbow body or not, the retreat he undertakes in the dark cave in Nanda Parbat is part of the most advanced strata of Dzogchen training, and the experience of light is, traditionally, very much the point.

As within the "lower" Tantras, there are two stages Dzogchen teachings: breakthrough (*khregs chod*) and *thoïgal*. The former primarily refines the theoretical principles for the enterprise and, on a practical level, focuses on cutting through conceptualization through open-eyed, yet content-less meditation.[26] *Thoïgal* is the more intense practical phase. Morrison does not translate *thod rgal* but some options proposed by Tibetologists include "leap-over," "direct leap," "direct transcendence," (the very literal) "passing over the crest," and even "all-surpassing realization."[27] At the risk of belaboring the point about preparation and sequencing, we should expect Batman to have his grounding in the Breakthrough stage before progressing to *thoïgal.* As Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche writes, these practices are envisioned as necessary compliments to each other: "Breakthrough, furthermore, must precede the direct leap. There is a saying in Tibet that if one doesn't breakthrough first, one won't be able to leap directly into anything."[28]

Thoïgal emphasizes a range of physical postures and breathing exercises as if it were working with the subtle (i.e., energetic) body. These elements redolent of Tantric yoga are hardly unique to *thoïgal*, however: its most distinctive feature is reframing these practices within the Great Perfection's particular physio-theology of light, and integrating them with visionary techniques including, but not limited to, dark retreat. Morrison refers, accurately enough (see Fig. 9.1), to the seven-week dark retreat as *yangti* (*yang ti*), but this moment of specificity is largely eclipsed by his more frequent use of the broader term *thoïgal* to refer to Batman's seven weeks in the cave (and his reference to *thoïgal* as a "ritual.") In fact, *thoïgal* would traditionally pair dark retreat with sky-gazing:

> the practices of the rDzogs chen neophytes known as the 'retreat into the darkness' (*mun mtshams*) and the 'clear light' (*'od gsal*) are directly connected. When practised, the former involves shutting oneself up in the darkness for a long period and the latter watching the sun light in various difficult postures.[29]

The reason for this, as Hatchell notes in *Naked Seeing* (currently one of a very few English sources to substantially address Tibetan dark retreat practices[30]), has to do with how Dzogchen literature reimagines Indic subtle body theory. In addition to the standard-issue set of ethereal channels woven through chakras along the spinal column to transport the energetic "winds" power the human organism, the tradition posits an additional web of luminous channels: "the main function of these is visionary: they serve as a pathway for luminous awareness, which resides in the heart, to travel upward and project out of the eyes, and be seen in vision."[31] This is the goal of dark retreat, which distinguishes the Dzogchen approach from other Indian yogic traditions of meditative sense withdrawal like the *pratyaȟāra* of the *Yoga Sutras* and from most other Buddhist Tantric traditions as well:[32] the Dzogchen practitioner enters a light-tight cave not to shut out sensory experience but to see more clearly these interior lights as manifestations of the primordially awakened mind. The instructions describe the increasingly intense and complex forms the visions will take, from flickering lamps, to geometric patterns, and eventually to a fully immersive mandala of 100 Peaceful and Wrathful Deities (*zhi khro*). As a grand finale, the whole scene dissolves: "the final vision is one in which appearances are exhausted, dissolving back to the expanse from which they emerged" in one of the tradition's "main descriptions of enlightenment."[33]

Whether we call these lights "phosphenes" and attribute them to so-called Prisoner's Cinema or, as Hatchell suggests, Charles Bonnet Syndrome, Batman's experience does not quite follow this script. He mentions "flashing lights," of course, but dismisses them as "normal." To be fair, from a scien-

tific point of view that is true: hallucinations of this sort are quite predictable when sighted people are deprived of visual stimuli. A person reasonably familiar with meditation might also expect a blasé if not overtly suspicious attitude towards visionary experiences, but in the case of dark retreat the sequence of lights, patterns, deities, and dissolution is entirely the point. So we must account, then, for Bruce Wayne's statement that he "chose to endure Thoẅgal . . . to taste the flavor of death . . . to know that I had finally experienced every eventuality."[34] A very motivated reader could perhaps stretch the meaning of the phrase "every eventuality" to mean he wanted to experience the luminous, limitless potentiality of pure awareness that Dzogchen metaphysicians assert is in fact the basis for all experience—this is, in an ultimate sense, the goal of the practice. Morrison, however, reiterates his view on multiple occasions that *thoẅgal* is a rehearsal for death.[35] Probably the connection Morrison makes is most visible within the same conversation (see Fig. 9.2), where Wayne's interlocutor, an unnamed monk seated just outside the frame to the left, gestures towards both ideas with the line, "in Thoẅgal, the initiate learns what the dead know. The self is peeled back to its black, radiant core."[36]

True, most Buddhist philosophers would likely balk at the language of "self," due to that foundational doctrine regarding the nonexistence of core selves (i.e., souls), but allowing that *Batman* is not a philosophical treatise this is not terribly far off. It might also seem a bit unusual to describe the radiance of pure awareness (i.e., the so-called core) as black rather than clear. Nevertheless, there is certainly a large and rather more easily accessible corpus of Tibetan literature concerned with recognizing the "Clear Light" when it appears during the dying process, a feat tantamount to enlightenment. If *thoẅgal* is not quite as concerned with the dying process in traditional sources as it is in Morrison's representation, it is relatively easy to imagine, however, that as someone with at least a passing familiarity with Tibetan religion he may have reflexively connected the practices to a relatively well-known cycle of texts (viz. the so-called *Tibetan Book of the Dead*[37]) presented as a guide for dying and navigating the terrifying intermediate state (*bar do*) between death and rebirth. These postmortem traditions, even if they bear somewhat tenuous connections to *thoẅgal* as such, are, like Dzogchen, primarily associated with the Nyingma tradition and in the *bardo*, as in dark retreat, the apparitions one encounters are supposedly the one hundred Peaceful and Wrathful Buddhas of the *Guhyagarbha Tantra.*[38] The association of Dzogchen with the dying process is not limited to the its Western enthusiasts, either. Germano has detailed how, within its first few centuries,

> [Dzogchen] came to constitute a vast meta-rubric concealing the heterogeneity of an extremely diverse array of traditions. These ranged from simple anti-technique, philosophical poetry (which I have labeled "pristine") to complex

Figure 9.2. Bruce Wayne (R) discusses his retreat with an unnamed monk (L). *Image from* Batman *#681 (Dec. 2008). Used with permission of DC Comics.* Batman *#681 © DC Comics.*

> tantric traditions dominated by death and ritual-contemplative praxis. I have labeled the latter traditions "funerary," but they could just as appropriately be termed "visionary" since these two tendencies go hand-in-hand in the relevant Great Perfection traditions.[39]

Thoögal techniques in particular tend to appear in the chronologically latest strata of Dzogchen teachings called the Instructional or Esoteric Precepts Class (*man ngag sde*), which Germano argues "embody a transformation of pristine Great Perfection into funerary or tantric Great Perfection."[40] On a general level, then, Morrison's linking *thoögal* and *bardo* traditions it is neither surprising nor terribly inaccurate, although Batman appears to underestimate the import of the wrathful Buddhas that the juxtaposition of Morrison's text with Daniel's illustrations (see Fig. 9.2) implies and which form much of the content of his "hallucinations" during the dark retreat.

A related and final deviation from traditional Tibetan dark retreat practice to consider here lies in Bruce Wayne's proactive response when he discovers the 'scar on his consciousness' left years earlier during the sensory deprivation experiments when Dr. Hurt planted the 'mind-bomb' to switch off the

Batman part of Wayne's personality. Partially, we may attribute this move on Morrison's part to the ubiquitous notion in contemporary Western culture that meditation is a fundamentally therapeutic enterprise. In this case, the highly advanced soteriological practice is given a pop-psychoanalytic spin: in dark retreat, Batman locates and investigates a repressed traumatic experience (the death of Robin) and develops a strategy for dealing with the subconscious emotions (guilt, powerlessness) and maladaptive impulses (to "kill" Batman) associated with it. In the context of Dzogchen meditation, the normative response would be to refrain from engaging this or any stimulus in the interest of remaining in a nonconceptual awareness of the present. This is one of the features that allegedly distinguishes a visionary practice like *thoögal* from the visualizations common to more mainstream Tantra where practitioners deliberately replace ordinary experience with divinized content.[41] What Bruce Wayne does is something rather more like this Tantric deity yoga than *thoögal*: he creates the Batman of Zur-en-arrh that will emerge in response to a psychologically resonant "keyword," an extraordinary instance of language not unlike a tantric mantra in its capacity to bring about this transformation. This fantastical, godlike (or at least Superman-like) version of himself unconstrained by commonsense rationality can then carry on after the death of the all-too-human Bruce Wayne/Batman personality.

This delusional superhero in red who storms Arkham Asylum with a baseball bat and a broken radio succeeds where the recently deceased Dark Knight might well have failed, for all his planning and gadgets. The Batman of Zur-en-arrh leaves reason at the asylum door and runs headlong toward utter ruin, facing down both his criminally insane alter-ego (the Joker) and a terrifying figure who both claims to be his father and the Devil himself. In the process, naturally, this psycho-Batman also dies—while literally buried in a coffin—so that the original Bruce Wayne/Batman identity can be triumphantly reborn. To properly understand Morrison's treatment of Tibetan traditions in his formulation of this story line, however, it is necessary to understand the underlying model and language of initiation that appears throughout the text.

DEATH AS INITIATORY ORDEAL

The language of initiation used in reference to Bruce Wayne's dark retreat practice may not have seemed especially odd to readers casually familiar with Tibetan Buddhism. Dzogchen is, after all, an esoteric tradition that requires practitioners to undergo a ritual initiation before being granted access to the teachings. What becomes clear on closer inspection, however, is that when Morrison uses the word "initiation" he has a rather different idea in mind than the Tibetan tradition. The English word "initiation" covers several

distinct rituals in a Buddhist context, none of which we observe Batman receiving in the cave. The most basic form of tantric initiation (*dbang*) in Buddhism authorizes one to invoke and engage particular tantric deities. In very general terms the introductory form is as follows. One first swears various oaths (e.g., of secrecy and loyalty) to the initiating guru who then, through a complex liturgy both visualized and external, purifies the initiates' *karma* and effects their "rebirth" within a lineage connected to the divinity in question so that disciples can receive the relevant texts, mantras, and practical details.[42] Dzogchen initiations may entail less formal ritual, but these too are fundamentally concerned with the transmission of enlightening knowledge from guru to disciple. One would expect to receive such an empowerment before beginning Dzogchen more generally, but *thoïgal* is a practice, not an initiation. To say so is like calling a road a door.

In this light, there is no apparent Buddhist "initiation" that Bruce Wayne "endures" in Nanda Parbat, as the guru figure is conspicuously absent or worse. (If we believe the monk who tries to kill Bruce Wayne during the conversation depicted in Fig. 9.2, his initiator was an agent of the Black Glove.) True, there is a death and rebirth sequence from which Wayne emerges with secret knowledge, but this much is common enough.[43] Indeed, the American English idiom "to give someone the third degree" likely derives from the third and final degree of Craft Freemasonry, wherein the aspiring Master Mason is subjected to rigorous interrogation before his symbolic death and resurrection. Freemasonry, rather than tantric Buddhism, seems more likely the source of Morrison's model for Batman's *thoïgal* initiation, with features that draw more on the former, as processed through the Victorian Occult Revival,[44] than any Tibetan sources. Many members of the most important fin de siècle occult organizations, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and the Theosophical Society, were themselves Masons, and these new traditions—especially the former—perpetuated to varying degrees the Masonic model of initiation via dramatic ritual, as if the initiate were the central character in a play for which only they had not been provided a script. Those who advanced would be expected, in turn, to play a part in initiation rites for the lower degrees through which they had passed. In Masonry the rituals themselves are meant to communicate, through allegory and symbol, the secrets of the tradition.

The central idea that set both the Theosophical Society and the Golden Dawn (between which there was, at various points, substantial overlap in membership) apart from the veritable explosion of esoteric para-masonic competition was that the leadership of each purported to take direction from some still more advanced spiritual hierarchy, an inner circle of superhuman adepts the former called the Masters or "Mahatmas" and the latter dubbed the Secret Chiefs.[45] That one might eventually secure an invitation to join these practically godlike beings at the highest levels of initiation was doubtless a

tantalizing prospect for ambitious esotericists, though in both cases the apparently straightforward path upwards through the ranks of the Masters' earthly representatives proved impossible. The Golden Dawn publicly imploded in the first years of the twentieth century, having only ever worked the first seven of its ten degrees, which recapitulated progression through the ten spheres of the Kabbalistic Tree of Life.[46] The Theosophists' sprawling, syncretic understanding of initiation, meanwhile, grew increasingly distant from its Masonic ancestry except in some of its terminology, to the extent that Alice Bailey could write in 1922 that the "ceremony of initiation" expands the initiate's consciousness but "does not bring about attainment, as is so often the misconception. It simply marks the recognition by the watching Teachers of the race of a definite point in evolution reached by the pupil."[47] The lion's share of the progress, she suggested, lay in the work the disciple had done to produce a "crisis, which necessitates the aid of a Master." Moreover, the Masters conduct these initiation ceremonies in increasingly rarefied mental and astral planes so that by the fifth (of seven), the initiate becomes an "'entered apprentice' of the Lodge on Sirius."[48]

I raise these admittedly arcane, sci-fi sounding points to point out how, as best as it can be reconstructed, initiation became dislodged in major currents of Western esotericism from the idea of scripted ritual performed for or on an aspirant in the flesh by his or her fellow human beings.[49] The Golden Dawn might have continued in this vein but it collapsed, while Theosophists ceded initiation to cosmic Masters charged with steering human evolution. Somewhere between these two positions sat the infamous British provocateur, ceremonial magician, and self-declared "Great Beast" Aleister Crowley (1875–1947), whose influence Grant Morrison displays as plainly as a Bat Signal over Gotham. His first and most famous Batman story, *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth*, includes direct references to Crowley and images from the tarot deck Crowley designed.[50] The young Beast, who shared the Theosophists' fascination with South Asian religions, had barely advanced to the Adeptus Minor (5 = 6) degree of the Golden Dawn system when, thanks in part to his winning personality, the order came crashing down. Crowley was, naturally, not going to allow such a thing to impede his ascension, and adopted a position somewhat similar to that of the Theosophists he typically scorned, distinguishing "real" initiation from initiation rituals.[51] He laid claim to the mantle of the Golden Dawn, after a fashion, but deemed the institution irrelevant to his own advancement through its degrees. These, one by one, he claimed to have attained through what Israel Regardie, one of Crowley's most sophisticated interpreters, called "a series of meditations, almost Tantric in nature, that utilized the clairvoyant visions of G.H. Frater S.R.M.D." (a.k.a. Samuel L. Mathers, one of the founders of the Golden Dawn).[52] By force of will, and with the blessings of the Secret Chiefs themselves, Crowley eventually declared himself Logos of the New Aeon.

Under the diktat "Do What Thou Wilt," Crowley unapologetically spiked the Golden Dawn's idiosyncratic punch of Christian Kabbalah and reconstructed Egyptian polytheism with liberal doses of sex, drugs, Nietzsche, Theravada Buddhism, and Haṭha Yoga.[53]

Crowley publicly proclaimed himself at least a Magus (9 = 2), equivalent in rank—it was claimed—to the Buddha and the Prophet Mohammad, and at times he recognized near contemporaries as having achieved similar feats, among them the founder of Theosophy and ersatz bodhisattva Madame Blavatsky. In his commentary on her *Voice of the Silence*, Crowley estimated that she had attained the degree of Master of the Temple (8 = 3), which is to say that she had successfully navigated the experience he called the Abyss to join the highest order, the ranks of the Secret Chiefs.[54] Crowley, as Alex Owen writes,

> taught that becoming a Master of the Temple implied not simply symbolic death and rebirth, a concept familiar to all magical initiates, but the annihilation of the personal self. The Abyss, then, was closely associated with the death of the individual—although not necessarily on the physical level.[55]

In the Golden Dawn's tradition of Hermetic or Occultist Kabbalah,[56] the Abyss is a gap in the Tree of Life, its map of the psyche/universe, where a sphere called *Da'at* (Knowledge) formerly existed. Kabbalistic metaphysics will take us too far afield, so it must be sufficient to say here that for Crowley the truth learned in *Da'at* is that when "Knowledge is analysed, it breaks up into the irrational dust of the Abyss."[57] He claimed to have crossed the Abyss himself and, like the Theosophists, found the experience harrowing; Asprem states, "in Crowley's system of magic, this crossing is correlated with the so-called dark night of the soul."[58] Worth quoting at greater length are Morrison's psychologically framed comments in an occult anthology that brazenly cribs its title from Crowley's *Book of Lies.* He describes the Abyss and the terrifying demon Crowley claimed to have encountered there in terms that should ring familiar to fans of his Batman run:

> Crowley embodied the destruction of Egoic Self structures as Choronzon, the Devil . . . the all-devouring guardian of "the Abyss" (The Abyss being a suitably dramatic and evocative term for an experiential "gap" in human consciousness.) The term can be applied to that state of mind during which Individual Egoic Self-consciousness begins to cannibalize itself rather than confront the usually frightening fact that Personality is not "real" in the existential sense and is simply a behavioral strategy. . . . Magicians who have successfully "crossed" the Abyss are considered no longer human, in the sense that survival of this ordeal necessitates the breaking down of SELF into multiple personality complexes.[59]

This void of self-doubt, the lack of cohesion in the fractured Bruce Wayne/Batman identity, his inability to say which personality is real and which is the mask, is precisely the "hole in my mind, waiting to open up and swallow me" that Wayne uncovers in his dark retreat meditations. To survive the ordeal, and the remainder of the plot devised by Dr. Hurt, who names himself the "hole in things . . . the enemy, the piece that can never fit, there since the beginning,"[60] Wayne must surrender and fragment even further, producing the psychotic Batman of Zur-en-arrh and hypostatizing his rationality (as if it were what Crowley and the Golden Dawn tradition before him would call his Holy Guardian Angel) as the impish "Bat Might" that he must leave behind on entering the Abyss. This Abyss ordeal entails the terrifying, eventually liberating dissolution of the ego, and traversing the Abyss—represented here by the additional death of the delusional backup Batman—in effect resurrects Bruce Wayne. Of course, the Dark Knight's dis- and re-integration has long been Morrison's concern as a writer too, since as Batman scholar Will Brooker wrote a decade before this story began, "Morrison understands that Batman is never a single character, but rather a host of Batmen."[61] There is even something recognizably Buddhist about Morrison's insistence that "Personality is not 'real,'" so setting Bruce Wayne's fragmentary dark night of the soul in a Tibetan cave seems a thematically appropriate if not entirely accurate depiction of Dzogchen dark retreat.

There is, on the other hand, something misleading in the dark retreat/dark night comparison as well. The deconstruction of fixed personal identity is a basic Buddhist tenet. The experience of the ego as unreal is a stated goal. Someone with substantial training in Buddhist thought and meditation would not find such a realization traumatic. Here we can consider an admittedly somewhat dated passage from Guenther, where he discusses a sequence of visions thought to occur during advanced Tantric meditation and the possibility that his readers might misinterpret the experience of "nothingness" followed by the Clear Light:

> The temptation is great to see in the reference to utter darkness just before the dawn of the primordial brilliant light something like that which Saint John of the Cross describes as 'the dark night of the soul.' There is in this experience in Tantrism nothing of the anxiety and agonies associated with the dark night. . . . After all there is here no longer a subject or an object. . . . William S. Haas has admirably assessed this difference when he declares that the process of emptying consciousness "does not involve the same devastating psychological effect as the destructive of everything objective would necessarily produce in the Western mind."[62]

Without endorsing the essentialism in Haas's notion of the "Western mind," this is a useful distinction. Buddhists do not typically describe the dissolution of an individual's personality in meditation as a terrifying experience since

the ego as usually experienced is the fundamental delusion Buddhist tradition aims to unravel.

This and certain other puzzling aspects of Bruce Wayne's *thoïgal* experience start to make sense, however, once we understand that Crowley, ex-Buddhist turned Nietzschian Prophet of his own religion, is Morrison's primary frame of reference. From here we can see why Morrison styles *yangti* an "initiation" and even which initiation it should correspond to: this is Batman gazing into the irrational Abyss. He enters the cave not to experience the luminous display of innate, pristine awareness but to "see clearly into the deepest dark . . . to go to the still eye in the storm of madness."[63] It should also come as no surprise that he finds "some pure source of evil" staring back at him from the traumatic cracks in his psyche. As David Hart observes, "even the most casual Bat-fan knows . . . Batman's experiences with death play a major role in making him who he is."[64] The twist is that when Bruce Wayne finally reaches "the limits of reason" and finds "the Devil waiting" he plunges into the gap and, deified by his sacrifice, emerges triumphant from the cave (iconographically reminiscent of Jesus' tomb alluded to in Fig. 9.1) and the grave.[65]

Here, as Singer suggests, Batman is forced decades after Morrison's *Arkham Asylum* to test whether the Joker, his homicidal fun-house mirror image who "has no real personality," may in fact hold the key to "some kind of super-sanity."[66] Although Ockham's Razor might suggest Morrison is "simply" playing with the secret identity tropes of superhero comics, since psychologist and bat-fanatic Travis Langley also states definitively that the idea that Batman has dissociative identity disorder is "so far off the mark it's ridiculous" since he has "full awareness and memory of what he's doing."[67] In fact, the Batman of Zur-en-arrh evinces no such awareness, and in this regard Batman's fragmented personality, however useful, would also be rather unlike the Tantric practitioner's enlightened "secret identity" as postulated in deity yoga.

Whatever one might wish to call it, Batman's tactic of further fracturing his personality can likewise be traced to Crowley, who prescribes as an exercise for learning to "rule thy Thought" that a disciple should, "by some device, such as the changing of thy ring from one finger to another, create in thyself two personalities, the thoughts of one being within entirely different limits from that of the other."[68] Similarly, the creation of the superhuman Batman of Zur-en-arrh (which, as noted above, can be compared to tantric deity yoga) could just as well fit within what Crowley termed the "assumption of God-forms,"[69] while Batman's relentless "apophenia"—which ultimately distinguishes his experience from the Joker's meaningless one—is consonant with the Oath of the Magister Templi to "interpret every phenomenon as a particular dealing of God with my soul."[70] Batman's statement that he wanted to taste death in order to experience every eventuality also recalls

Crowley's boast that he "would go to prison or to the scaffold for the sake of the experience"[71] and the comic's overall anti-rationalism is rampant in the Great Beast's *libri*. Perhaps most suggestively of all in relation to Dzogchen's theories of light and aspirations to the "rainbow body" are what Crowley calls "the whole business in a nutshell": the creation of a "body of Light; this one develops and controls; it gains new powers as one progresses, usually by means of what is called 'initiation:' finally, one carries on almost one's whole life in this Body of Light, and achieves in its own way the mastery of the Universe."[72]

Regardie is doubtless correct that "some scholar should attempt a comparison of classical Tibetan Tantric texts with some of Crowley's so-called official instructions,"[73] but I will not attempt such here. This much is sufficient, I hope, to establish that *thoïgal*, the fundamental Buddhist conceit in Morrison's *Batman*, has been filtered through Crowley and to open the question of how deep the proverbial rabbit hole goes. To be fair, Morrison may well have drawn some of these ideas from other sources or, as it were, from the ether. Morrison—who at points has referenced not only Dzogchen practices but *tummo* and *choïd* (*gcod*)[74]—is clearly interested in Tibetan Buddhism, which it should be acknowledged Crowley knew precious little about. Gnostic Christianity is another, even more constant theme in Morrison's work, along with Ericksonian hypnotherapy, and he has spoken at length about his interest in the "sigil magic" of outsider artist Austin Osman Spare. As most fans will know, Morrison is a very public proponent not of Crowley's proprietary religio-magical blend (i.e., Thelema) but of his own pop-culture-saturated varietal of a more recent development called Chaos Magic, which emerged in Thatcher's Britain as a punk-inspired, pragmatic alternative to the prevailing hierarchical ceremonial magic traditions its adherents deemed overly theoretical, pompous, and outdated. Chaos magicians like Morrison could be said to pursue the most individualistic and empiricist interpretations of Crowley's thought (e.g., "Let success be your proof") in a radically decentralized, eclectic environment.[75] Like its absurdist, Zen-inflected American cousin Dischordianism, Chaos Magic's most distinctive feature may be principled resistance to principles, including (or especially) basic rationality. Its two arguably most central aphorisms, "belief is a tool," and the perennially misattributed "nothing is true, everything is permitted" are—as deployed in their strongest forms by chaos magicians—patently and unapologetically circular.[76] With these as first principles, there can be no reliable means of parsing irony and solipsism, no distinguishing a wink from a blink. Rhetorically at least, as can be seen in Morrison's *Batman*, reason as we usually know it becomes irrelevant or worse, an impediment, to actualizing one's will. Case in point: to discover and defeat the Devil, our archetypical vigilante detective retreats into seven straight weeks of intense meditation, embracing delusion and disassociation.

To say that Morrison draws more inspiration from Crowley than from any Tibetan sources in his depiction of *thoïgal* is to make two related claims. The first is that Morrison's Dzogchen-practicing Batman is more deeply indebted on a philosophical level to Crowley than to any explicitly Buddhist source. The second is that like Crowley before him, Morrison is a practicing magician who makes no distinction between his professional (i.e., literary) and soteriological pursuits. He treats religious ideas as fodder for comics, but the reverse is equally true.[77] Since Morrison perceives writing as a magical act shaping his own experience and that of his readers, we cannot reliably separate choices he makes in the service of the story from what he may "really know" or believe about Tibetan Buddhism. His thoughts on *thoïgal* have proven influential in any case. Commentary published by the academic-adjacent Sequart Organization on Morrison's celebrated opus *The Invisibles* reproduces his take: "Thogal is a 'rehearsal for death,' delving into the darkest places in one's own soul and emerging reborn. It's key concept is that exposure to the darkness produces a kind of inoculation against it in the future."[78] Technically accurate or not, it is clear from his other comics exploring similar themes, from the expository essay on the Abyss quoted above, and from his earnest reports of a unitary encounter with mercurial, fifth-dimensional entities in Nepal, that Morrison takes yogic traditions (and comics) dead seriously. Morrison admitted in an interview that "putting all that stuff in something like *Batman* is a way of forcing people who wouldn't really care otherwise to go online and suddenly start reading about Tsog Chen Buddhism . . . one of the most amazing philosophical systems on the planet."[79]

NOTES

1. My thanks to Paul Hackett, Keith Cantu, and Brenton Sullivan for helpful suggestions and conversations while writing this piece. I am also grateful to DC Comics for allowing use of the images.

2. See "Genesis of the Bat" (*Batman Begins* DVD featurette) and Christopher Nolan, *Batman Begins*, DVD (Warner Brothers, 2005).

3. Donald S Lopez, *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 5. The most obvious, direct ancestor of the Victorian fascination with a secret society of magical adepts purveying esoteric teachings from the East is the idea of a Rosicrucian fraternity preserved in Masonic lore, the classic work on which by Yates, who doubts its mythic founder Christian Rozenkreutz or any such organization existed in the early seventeenth century when its famous manifestoes first circulated in Germany. Frances Amelia Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* (London; New York: Routledge, 1972), 263. McIntosh suggests that the "concept of near-superhuman secret chiefs (*unbekannte Oberen*) seems to date from" the middle of the eighteenth century. Christopher McIntosh, *The Rosicrucians: The History, Mythology and Rituals of an Occult Order*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Red Wheel / Weiser, 1997). 71. Possibly the basic idea derives from the ranked hierarchies of saints in Sufi tradition, on which see, inter alia, John Renard, *Friends of God: Islamic Images of Piety, Commitment, and Servanthood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

4. After the sixteenth-century Spanish poem by St. John of the Cross. The definitive translation to date is John of the Cross and E. Allison Peers, *The Complete Works of St. John of the*

Cross. Vol. I, General Introduction, Ascent of Mount Carmel, Dark Night of the Soul (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1974).

5. A *Batman R.I.P.* checklist compiled by DC Comics officially includes *Batman* #676–681, *Detective Comics* #846–850, *Nightwing* #147–150, *Robin* #175–176, and *Batman & the Outsiders* #11–13, although not all of these were written by Morrison himself. Some books written later (e.g., *52* #47) also depict the events in Nanada Parbat. Also, although the art is beautifully done, I will generally refer to Morrison as the author of the work since I am primarily concerned with the language that reflects his occult proclivities.

6. Marc Singer, *Grant Morrison: Combining the Worlds of Contemporary Comics* (Jackson, Miss.: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 268.

7. Morrison, Grant (w), Tony Daniel (p), and Daniel, Florea, Glapion, and Irwin (i), "Space Medicine," *Batman*, no. 672 (February 2008). DC Comics.

8. Morrison, Grant (w), Tony Daniel (p), and Jonathan Glapion and Sandu Florea (i), "Joe Chill in Hell," *Batman*, no. 673 (March 2008). DC Comics. In the original 1963 story "Robin Dies at Dawn" the experiment was about isolation during space travel. For this and the other sources Morrison used as inspiration for *Batman R.I.P.* see Bill (w) Finger et al., *Batman: The Black Casebook* (New York: DC Comics, 2009).

9. Morrison, Grant (w), Tony Daniel (p), and Sandu Florea (i), "Batman Dies at Dawn," *Batman*, no. 674 (April 2008). DC Comics.

10. Morrison, Grant (w), Tony Daniel (p), and Jonathan Glapion and Sandu Florea (i), "Joe Chill in Hell." Elsewhere he says he saw the future.

11. Practically, it would be nearly impossible to maintain Batman-like physical conditioning and levels of expertise. And Zehr does not even consider all of Batman's alleged meditation training! E. Paul Zehr, *Becoming Batman: The Possibility of a Superhero* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 263.

12. Grant Morrison, *Supergods: What Masked Vigilantes, Miraculous Mutants, and a Sun God from Smallville Can Teach Us about Being Human* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2013), 628.

13. Morrison, Grant (w), Tony Daniel (p), and Sandu Florea (i), "Hearts in Darkness," *Batman*, no. 681 (December 2008). DC Comics.

14. Morrison, Grant (w), Tony Daniel (p), and Sandu Florea (i), "Miracle on Crime Alley," *Batman*, no. 679 (September 2008). DC Comics.

15. Another retconned/appropriated sci-fi Batman story, "The Superman of Planet-X" (1958), included in *The Black Casebook.* In this one, Zur-en-arrh was the name of a planet on which Batman had the powers of Superman. In Morrison's appropriation, "Zur-en-arrh" is the garbled phrase "Zorro in Arkham," a reference to the idea that the insane, godlike Batman is like a version of the masked vigilante Zorro suited for Gotham's most notorious psychiatric hospital. This is also, in Morrison's telling, a reference to Bruce Wayne's father's last words before the fatal mugging. Morrison, Grant (w), Tony Daniel (p), and Sandu Florea (i), "Hearts in Darkness."

16. Truly dedicated fans (or those who read *The Black Casebook*) may recognize this figure as Bat-Mite, who debuts in *Detective Comics* #267 (1959).

17. Morrison, Grant (w), Tony Daniel (p), and Sandu Florea (i), "The Thin White Duke of Death," *Batman*, no. 680 (October 2008). DC Comics.

18. Morrison, Grant (w), Tony Daniel (p), and Sandu Florea (i), "Hearts in Darkness."

19. Morrison, Grant (w), Tony Daniel (p), and Sandu Florea (i), "Midnight in the House of Hurt," *Batman*, no. 676 (June 2008). DC Comics.

20. Barstow noted the Japanese appearance of the temple (and a couple of other points replicated here) in a brief but insightful 2010 blog post. Geoff Barstow, "The Comics Connection I: Batman Does Tögal!," *The Lost Yak*, February 25, 2010, https://thelostyak.com/2010/02/25/the-comics-connection-i-batman-does-togal/.

21. For a brief summary of the circumstances surrounding the emergences of Nyingma as a sect, see Ronald M. Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance: Tantric Buddhism in the Rebirth of Tibetan Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 73–77. For an extensive historical and doctrinal treatment of the school, see Dudjom Jigdral Yeshe Dorje, *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism: Its Fundamentals and History*, trans. Gyurme Dorje and Kapstein (Somer-

ville: Wisdom Publications, 2012), and Samten Gyaltsen Karmay, *The Great Perfection (rDzogs Chen): A Philosophical and Meditative Teaching of Tibetan Buddhism* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2007). For a perspective questioning the distinctiveness of these practices, see His Holiness The Dalai Lama, "Union of the Old and New Translation Schools," in *Kindness, Clarity, and Insight* (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1984).

22. Admittedly it could make for rather dull copy: *Coming Soon! Batman Recites 108,000 Lengthy Purification Mantras! Don't Miss Next Time When Batman Offers 108,000 Maṇḍalas to the Buddhas!* On the preliminaries see Third Dzogchen Rinpoche, *Great Perfection: Outer and Inner Preliminaries*, trans. Courtland Dahl (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion Publications, 2007). Cortland Dahl, *Gateway to the Great Perfection: A Guide to the Dzogchen Preliminary Practices* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion Publications, 2009). Morrison depicts Batman entering the meditative state "*nirvikalpa samadhi*" in an earlier issue (and that just after uttering a prayer he "learned from the lamas in Nanda Parbat"). It is likely Morrison picked up the technical term from neo-Vedantic sources, where it is quite prominent. See Morrison, Grant (w) and John Van Fleet (art), "The Clown at Midnight," *Batman*, no. 663 (April 2007). DC Comics.

23. The distinguishing feature of tantric practice. See Jeffrey Hopkins, *The Tantric Distinction* (London: Wisdom Publications, 1985).

24. There is a later Batman story line in which Batman demonstrates proficiency in the fundamentals of Buddhist Tantric yoga viz. the Inner Heat or *tummo* (*gtum mo*). See Gregg Hurwitz (w), Tony Daniel (p), and Richard Friend (i), "The Final Lesson," *Detective Comics* 2, no. 0 (November 2012). DC Comics. Like Morrison elsewhere the author treats this as a means of keeping the physical body warm in cold conditions. Cf. Grant Morrison (w), Frank Quitely (p), and John Stokes (i), "Glitterdamerung!," *The Invisibles* 3, no. 1 (June 2000). Vertigo [DC Comics], 2. Still another Batman author makes a similar move where Batman uses a method he supposedly learned from Sufis to slow his bleeding in Paul Bolles (w), William Rosado (p), and Bob Wiacek (i), "Orphan," *Detective Comics* 1, no. 776 (January 2003). DC Comics. On *tummo* see Herbert V. Guenther, *The Life and Teaching of Nāropa* (Boston: Shambhala South Asia Edtions, 1999). 53–61 for a narrative/expository presentation from a hagiography of the "New School" saint most associated with the practice, and 158–174 for the analysis of its philosophical underpinnings quoted at the beginning of this piece. For a more detailed, if slightly less academic, treatment of *tummo* as the foundation of the Six Yogas System as taught in the Gelugpa sect, see Glenn H. Mullin, *Tsongkhapa's Six Yogas of Naropa* (Ithaca NY: Snow Lion, 1996), 140–66.

25. On the rainbow body in comparative perspective, with potential implications for our discussion of Crowley later in this essay, see Francis Tiso, *Rainbow Body and Resurrection: Spiritual Attainment, the Dissolution of the Material Body, and the Case of Khenpo A Cho* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2016).

26. Sam Van Schaik, *Approaching the Great Perfection: Simultaneous and Gradual Approaches to Dzogchen Practice in Jigme Lingpa's Longchen Nyingtig* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2004), 99. On Breakthrough, see Dudjom Lingpa, *Buddhahood without Meditation: A Visionary Account Known as Refining One's Perception (Nang-Jang)*, trans. Richard Barron and Susanne Fairclough (Junction City CA: Padma Pub., 2002). Third Dzogchen Rinpoche, *Great Perfection Volume II: Separation and Breakthrough*, trans. Courtland Dahl (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion Publications, 2008). For short summary of *thogal*, see Janet Gyatso, *Apparitions of the Self: The Secret Autobiographies of a Tibetan Visionary* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), 202–6.

27. Karmay notes that "the term *thod rgal* . . . is in fact a translation of Sanskrit *vyutkrāntaka* or *viṣkandaka.*" Karmay, *The Great Perfection (rDzogs Chen)*, 214n193. "Leapover" is used by Dudjom Rinpoche and Van Shaik, "direct leap" by the Third Dzogchen Rinpoche, "direct transcendence" by Germano, "passing over the crest" by Karmay, and "all-surpassing realization" by Pettit. See, *inter alia,* Dudjom Jigdral Yeshe Dorje, *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism*. Van Schaik, *Approaching the Great Perfection*. Third Dzogchen Rinpoche, *Great Perfection Volume II: Separation and Breakthrough*. David Germano, "The Funerary Transformation of the Great Perfection (Rdzogs Chen)," *Journal of the International Association of Tibetan Studies*, no. 1 (2005): 1–54. John W. Pettit and Penor Rinpoche, *Mipham's*

Beacon of Certainty Illuminating the View of Dzogchen, the Great Perfection (Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 2013).

28. Third Dzogchen Rinpoche, *Great Perfection Volume II: Separation and Breakthrough*. Xix.

29. Karmay, *The Great Perfection (rDzogs Chen)*, 187.

30. The others are Lopon Tenzin Namdak and Richard Dixey, *Heart Drops of Dharmakaya: Lopon Tenzin Namdak on the Kun Tu Bzang Po'i Snying Tig of Shardza Tashi Gyaltsen* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publ., 1993). Martin Lowenthal, *Dawning of Clear Light: A Western Approach to Tibetan Dark Retreat Meditation* (Charlottesville, VA: Hampton Roads Pub., 2003). For a short, elliptical translation of a primary source on dark retreat see Marcia Binder Schmidt et al., *Wellsprings of the Great Perfection: Lives and Insights of the Early Masters in the Dzogchen Lineage* (Hong Kong: Rangjung Yeshe Publ, 2006), 294–97. There are fleeting mentions in some of the hagiographic literature as well, such as where Shabkar's childhood visions in the dark presage his later success in the practice. Matthieu Ricard and Shabkar, *The Life of Shabkar: The Autobiography of a Tibetan Yogin* (Ithaca NY: Snow lion, 2001), 17 and 81.

31. Christopher Hatchell, *Naked Seeing: The Great Perfection, the Wheel of Time, and Visionary Buddhism in Renaissance Tibet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 105.

32. On *pratyahāra*, see Edwin F Bryant, *The Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali: A New Edition, Translation, and Commentary with Insights from the Traditional Commentators* (New York: North Point Press, 2009), 719–26. Hariharānanda Āraṇya and Paresh Nath Mukerji, *Yoga Philosophy of Patañjali: Containing His Yoga Aphorisms with Vyāsa's Commentary in Sanskrit and a Translation with Annotations Including Many Suggestions for the Practice of Yoga* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 245–48. On the *Guhyasamāja Tantra* method of withdrawing the senses from ordinary appearances through "physical isolation" see Daniel Cozort, *Highest Yoga Tantra: An Introduction to the Esoteric Buddhism of Tibet* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion Publications, 2005). 69–83. Cozort then compares this practice with roughly parallel Kālacakra stages on pages 117–33. Hatchell, who we cited at length earlier, compares Dzogchen and Kālacakra sensory deprivation/visionary techniques at length in his book. Hatchell, *Naked Seeing*.

33. Hatchell, *Naked Seeing*, 63.

34. Morrison, Grant (w), Tony Daniel (p), and Sandu Florea (i), "Hearts in Darkness."

35. Morrison, Grant (w), Tony Daniel (p), and Sandu Florea (i), "Midnight in the House of Hurt."

36. Morrison, Grant (w), Tony Daniel (p), and Sandu Florea (i), "Hearts in Darkness."

37. For a complete translation see Karma Lingpa, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, ed. Graham Coleman with Thupten Jinpa, trans. Gyurme Dorje (New York: Penguin Books, 2006). There is a very readable historical treatment in Donald S. Lopez, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: A Biography* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2013). For a more detailed account, see Bryan J. Cuevas, *The Hidden History of the Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

38. See Henk Blezer, "Kar Gliṅ Źi Khro: A Tantric Buddhist Concept" (Research School CNWS, 1997). Germano addresses the incorporation of what he calls 'funerary Buddhism' into Dzogchen in Germano, "The Funerary Transformation of the Great Perfection (Rdzogs Chen)."

39. Germano, "The Funerary Transformation of the Great Perfection (Rdzogs Chen)," 7.

40. Germano, "The Funerary Transformation of the Great Perfection (Rdzogs Chen)," 13.

41. Jigme Lingpa, for example, distinguishes *thoẅgal* from Tantra in such terms. Van Schaik, *Approaching the Great Perfection*, 102.

42. For a discussion of related Śaiva Tantric initiations, including a detailed account of death and rebirth sequence, see chapter 3 of Richard H. Davis, *Ritual in an Oscillating Universe: Worshiping Śiva in Medieval India* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991). Cf. Gavin D. Flood, *The Tantric Body: The Secret Tradition of Hindu Religion* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2006), 131 ff. On the probable historical origins of these rituals in Indian coronation rites, see also chapter 4 of Ronald M. Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism: A Social History of the Tantric Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002). There is also a book-length commentary on the Kālacakra initiation by the 14th Dalai Lama: Tenzin Gyatso, the

Dalai Lama, *Kālachakra Tantra: Rite of Initiation for the Stage of Generation*, ed. and trans. Jeffrey Hopkins (Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 1999).

43. See Bogdan on Masonic initiations and their Golden Dawn descendents. However, he does specify *pace* Eliade that "death is not central in *every* initiation." Henrik Bogdan, *Western Esotericism and Rituals of Initiation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 33.

44. On the Victorian Occult Revival, see Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2004). Daniël Van Egmond, "Western Esoteric Schools in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries," in *Gnosis and Hermeticism from Antiquity to Modern Times*, ed. Roelof van den Broek and Wouter J. Hanegraaff, SUNY Series in Western Esoteric Traditions (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998). On the Golden Dawn, see Butler, who notes that the Golden Dawn's Adeptus Minor initiation (5 = 6) also involved the "symbolic death and resurrection of the candidate" in a manner evoking both Jesus and Christian Rozenkreutz. Alison Butler, *Victorian Occultism and the Making of Modern Magic: Invoking Tradition* (Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 35. On Theosophists, see Joscelyn Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).

45. Butler has suggested the Golden Dawn took inspiration from the Theosophical Society in this regard. Butler, *Victorian Occultism and the Making of Modern Magic*, 3. Van Egmond details relationships between these organizations and compares the Theosophists' esoteric section with the Golden Dawn in Van Egmond, "Western Esoteric Schools in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries," 325–32.

46. Bogdan, *Western Esotericism and Rituals of Initiation*, 128. We only have published text of the first five initiation rituals but, to be fair, we could hardly expect rituals for the supernal triad. See Israel Regardie, *The Complete Golden Dawn System of Magic* (Tempe AZ: Falcon Press, 1984).

47. Alice A. Bailey, *Initiation, Human and Solar* (New York: Lucifer Publishing, 1922), 15.

48. Bailey, *Initiation, Human and Solar*, 18.

49. But there are supposedly cases where Shiva initiates directly. Alexis Sanderson, "Meaning in Tantric Ritual," in *Essais Sur Le Rituel III: Colloque Du Centenaire de La Section Des Sciences Religieuses de l'École Pratique Des Hautes Études*, ed. A. M. Blondeau and K. Schipper, Bibliothèque de l'École Des Hautes Études, Sciences Religieuses, Volume CII (Louvain-Paris: Peeters, 1995), 44–45.

50. Morrison, Grant (w) and Dave McKean (art), *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth* (New York: DC Comics, 1989).

51. "I began to see that one might become a Master of the Temple without necessarily knowing any technical Magick or mysticism at all." Aleister Crowley, *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley: An Autohagiography*, ed. John Symonds and Kenneth Grant (London: Penguin Arkana, 1969), 656. In this view of initiation rituals, perhaps, we see something a little less like Tantra than the formalized authentication of meditative attainment found in the Zen tradition, where stamped certificates of enlightenment adorn monastery walls. On initiation in Crowley's system the most important work from inside the tradition is probably J. Daniel Gunther, *Initiation in the Aeon of the Child: The Inward Journey*, Kindle edition, vol. 1, 3 vols., The Inward Journey (Lake Worth, FL: Ibis Press, 2014).

52. Regardie, *The Complete Golden Dawn System of Magic*, 10.

53. On Crowley and his influence, see Henrik Bogdan and Martin P. Starr, *Aleister Crowley and Western Esotericism: An Anthology of Critical Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). On Crowley and South Asian traditions, see Hugh Urban, "The Power of the Impure: Transgression, Violence and Secrecy in Bengali Śākta Tantra and Modern Western Magic," *Numen* 50, no. 3 (2003): 269–308. Gordan Djurdjevic, *India and the Occult: The Influence of South Asian Spirituality on Modern Western Occultism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). For the impact of Crowley and his circles on modern postural yoga, see Suzanne Newcombe, "Magic and Yoga: The Role of Subcultures in Transcultural Exchange," in *Yoga Traveling: Bodily Pratice in Transcultural Perspective*, ed. Beatrix Hauser (Heidelberg: Springer, 2013), 57–79.

54. See for example p. 85 of Crowley's commentary on the *Voice of the Silence* in Aleister Crowley et al., *Commentaries on the Holy Books (and Other Papers)*, vol. 4, The Equinox

(York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser, 1996). Blavatsky speaks of seven levels of initiation. Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion and Philosophy* (London: Theosophical Publishing Co., 1888), 206–7. The Abyss seems to correspond in her reckoning to the Fourth initiation. Theosophists frequently employ Crucifixion imagery to describe the crisis precipitating the Fourth Initiation, after which one becomes a Master. Besant comes close to Crowley, though, with her "gulf of silence, where the disciple hangs alone in the void." Annie Besant, *Initiation, the Perfecting of Man* (London: Theosophical Pub. Society, 1912), 99. Leadbeader likewise calls it "a condition in which the man stands absolutely alone in space, and feels cut off from all life." Charles Webster Leadbeater, *Masters and the Path*, 2nd ed. (Madras: Theosophical Pub., 1927), 195. On the Secret Chiefs, who he reasons are at least Magi (9 = 2), see chapter 9 of Aleister Crowley, *Magick without Tears*, ed. Karl J. Germer (Hampton NJ: Thelema Publishing Co., 1954).

55. Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*, 199.

56. As distinct from Jewish Kabbalah. See Egil Asprem, "Kabbalah Recreata: Reception and Adaptation of Kabbalah in Modern Occultism," *The Pomegranate* 9, no. 2 (2007): 132–53.

57. Aleister Crowley, *Little Essays toward Truth* (Scottsdale, AZ: New Falcon Pub., 1996), 5.

58. Egil Asprem, *Arguing with Angels: Enochian Magic and Modern Occulture*, SUNY Series in Western Esoteric Traditions (Albany: SUNY Press, 2013), 96. J. Daniel Gunter, a leading contemporary writer more conscientiously within Crowley's tradition, however, rejects the equation of Crossing the Abyss with the Dark Night of the Soul experience: the former he frames as "complete psychic disintegration" resulting in the permanent destruction of "the identification of the self with the Ego-making facility . . . what the Buddhists refer to as *saṅkhāra,* the Tendencies," while the latter he describes as a period of apathy and spiritual dryness that comes much earlier in the aspirant's initiatory journey. On the Abyss, see "The Twofold Crossing" section of J. Daniel Gunther, *The Angel and the Abyss: Comprising The Angel and the Abyss and the Hieroglyphic Triad*, Kindle edition, vol. 2–3, 3 vols., The Inward Journey (Lake Worth FL: Ibis Press, 2014). On the Dark Night as the depression of a Neophyte rather than the ordeal of the Abyss, see "The Dark Night" chapter in Gunther, *Initiation in the Aeon of the Child*.

59. Richard Metzger, *Book of Lies: The Disinformation Guide to Magick and the Occult* (San Francisco: Disinformation Books, 2014), 24. On Crowley's ordeal in the Abyss and confrontation with Choronzon (John Dee's name for the Devil, since Crowley relied on Dee's Enochian magic in the working) and on Enochian magic more generally, see Asprem, *Arguing with Angels*, 95–97. For Crowley's own poetic account, see the 10th Aethyr of Aleister Crowley, *The Vision and the Voice* (Dallas: Sangreal Foundation, 1972).

60. Morrison, Grant (w), Tony Daniel (p), and Sandu Florea (i), "Hearts in Darkness."

61. Will Brooker, *Batman Unmasked: Analyzing a Cultural Icon*, PDF eBook (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 260.

62. Guenther, *The Life and Teaching of Nāropa*, 172.

63. Morrison, Grant (w), Tony Daniel (p), and Sandu Florea (i), "Hearts in Darkness."

64. William Irwin, Mark D. White, and Robert Arp, *Batman and Philosophy: The Dark Knight of the Soul* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2009), 219.

65. Morrison, Grant (w), Tony Daniel (p), and Sandu Florea (i), "Hearts in Darkness." Actually, the Christian allusions are even less subtle than that.

66. Singer makes this connection with Arkham and suggests the Joker in this case is a corrective to Morrison's celebration on Dissociative Identity Disorder in *the Invisibles*. Singer, *Grant Morrison*, 273–274.

67. Travis Langley, *Batman and Psychology: A Dark and Stormy Knight* (Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), 581.

68. Aleister Crowley, *Magick: In Theory and Practice* (New York: Dover, 1976), 492.

69. Crowley, *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley: An Autohagiography*, 127.

70. Morrison, Grant (w), Tony Daniel (p), and Sandu Florea (i), "Hearts in Darkness." Crowley, *Magick*, 191.

71. Crowley, *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley: An Autohagiography*, 280

72. Crowley, *Magick without Tears*, 293.

73. Israel Regardie, *The Eye in the Triangle: An Interpretation of Aleister Crowley* (Las Vegas: Falcon Press, 1989), 255.

74. *Choïd* in his introduction to Phil Hine and Grant Morrison, *Prime Chaos: Adventures in Chaos Magic* (Scottsdale, AZ: New Falcon Pub., 2004). *Tummo* in Morrison, Grant (w), Frank Quitely (p), and John Stokes (i), "Glitterdamerung!"

75. Beyond Crowley and Spare, the Ur text of Chaos Magic is almost certainly *Liber Null*. See Peter J. Carroll, *Liber Null and Psychonaut* (York Beach ME: Samuel Weiser, 1987). Phil Hine, for whom Morrison wrote an introduction as cited above, is probably the most prolific and respected contemporary author on the subject of chaos magic. His deep engagement with Hindu tantric traditions (and academic scholarship on the same) deserves an article unto itself.

76. For an exploration of chaos magic as quintessentially postmodern see Hugh Urban, *Magia Sexualis: Sex, Magic, and Liberation in Modern Western Esotericism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 228–54.

77. On the *Invisibles* as a magical "hyper-sigil" and Morrison's "own Arkham Asylum dark night of the soul" see chs. 17–18 of Morrison, *Supergods*. For a more academic treatment, there is Megan Goodwin's chapter on the *Invisibles* in Aaron David Lewis and Christine Hoff Kraemer, eds., *Graven Images Religion in Comic Books and Graphic Novels* (New York: Continuum, 2010). Morrison has spoken about this more recently in Gabriel Kennedy, "Grant Morrison interview: 'Laughter Can Banish Any and All Demons,'" *Boing Boing*, April 17, 2017, http://boingboing.net/2017/04/17/__trashed-10.html.

78. Patrick Meaney, *Our Sentence Is Up: Seeing Grant Morrison's* The Invisibles, Kindle edition (Edwardsville IL: Sequart Research & Literacy Organization, 2012). Meaney compares events in *The Invisibles* to "an enforced Thogal" (subheading: Vol. 3 #10).

79. On this event and its putative influence on Morrison's work see Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Mutants & Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 16–22; Kennet Granholm, "The Occult and Comics," in *The Occult World*, ed. Christopher Partridge (New York: Routledge, 2015), 503–5. For one of Morrison's own accounts of his "Kathmandu experience" and the discussion of his aims with *Batman*, see the interview at the end of Meaney, *Our Sentence Is Up*.

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